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Messenger

by [hundredhanded](#)

Summary

Ancient Greece AU. Angela Zeigla is a physician to the common people, stitching wounds, delivering babies, healing pains. But assassinations, arson, and a dark-eyed Egyptian soldier interrupt the life she knew.

Stasis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Ow! Oh, by the gods, that hurts." A young man, shirtless, winced as a bone needle worked deftly in and out of his skin, black thread binding the long wound shut.

"Stay still, idiot. Consider it a reminder to stay out of bar fights."

"It was *his* fault—*ow!*"

"There. We're done. Relax. There are bandages around here."

Angela Zeigla rose from her position at the young man's side, cleaning her hands in a small bowl of water to her right and wiping them dry on a nearby cloth. She strode over to a small wooden cabinet, pulling out a small clay pot and extracting a roll of linen bandages from the wine in which they were immersed. Her aspect stern, she returned to the young man's side, sitting down on a three-legged stool and affixing them firmly to the newly-sutured wound running upwards over his ribs. She ignored his slight yelp.

"Keep this on for four days at least. And I don't think I need to tell you to stay out of trouble, Galenos. Come to me again with a wound like this and you'll get no tincture of poppy beforehand. *That* will teach you a lesson." Her voice was attractive, pleasant to the ear, but had a hard, commanding edge, ideal for instructing wayward patients like this one. The young man nodded glumly.

"Fear not. You have my drinking money for the next few months, Doctor," he said with a rueful grin, digging a few drachmae out of his pocket and handing them to her.

"Hopefully that means you'll never darken my door again," she said, cracking a smile and bringing a hand to his shoulder. "Here's your shirt. Get going, Galenos. Be safe. Come by if it starts to swell—I have a salve that will help." He nodded, repeating his thanks, as he pulled on his vestment and left, limping slightly with the pain. She watched him go, then placed her needle and thread back in their appointed wooden box, sliding it back into the wooden cabinet along the north wall of the room.

Angela was a physician. Young men, soldiers and not, came to her with fresh wounds, infections, sometimes just nightmares: she disinfected and sutured the physical wounds, and whispered comforts for the mental wounds. Sometimes they cried. She let them. The old soldiers came with phantom pains, rotten teeth, blindness: she helped where she could, though she avoided dentistry if she could help it. The women of the city came to her, too: some pregnant and joyous, and she smiled along with them, instructing them as to how to care for their unborn children, and sending messages to the old women who would help them after the birth. And some young women came with rounded bellies, but with eyes cast down: usually accidental pregnancies, but far too many rapes. She gave them an herb from Cyrenaica, an abortifacient called silphium, precious, more precious than gold, but one for which she always haggled mercilessly with the traders at the docks. The young women cried too, more often than not, when their bleeding had ceased. She let them. Held them, too.

She was good at her job. She never made much money, but enough to keep her two-room domicile clean and free of vermin, and she never went hungry. She took pride in the job: every stitch, every pulled tooth, every birth. When she lost a patient, she always attended their funeral,

even when the families stared daggers at her. She had the people's trust, and that meant more to her than all the drachmae in the city. She could have lived in comparative luxury had she been the personal physician to one of the eupatridae, the nobles, but working among the people was more interesting and much more satisfying. Here she made a difference: relieving pain, assisting births, curing infections. Improving people's lives.

Her home was in the north of Athens, the Alikokou district, in the shadow of the Acropolis. They were humble quarters: two rooms, one a bedroom, messy, sheets and clothes and the few medical texts she could afford strewn around it; the other, her office, mostly kept clean, save for the dishes piling up on the low-slung table in the corner. It wasn't much, but she took pride in it. Sometimes, late in the morning, when the light from the sun illuminated the pale stucco walls, she closed her eyes and reveled in her gratitude for having a place that was *hers*. It was much more than most people had: on her rounds, she had seen families crammed in six, seven, even eight to a single room, to say nothing of the many who eked out an existence on the street.

Angela's stomach rumbled, and she realized she hadn't eaten anything that day, save for a handful of figs upon waking. She pushed the door open and shut its weathered wood behind her. The sun shone hot and heavy overhead, and she squinted, shielding her eyes from its rays. Her skin was fair, thanks to her mixed Helvetian and Greek heritage, several shades lighter than most of her compatriots. Her blonde hair was unusual, attracting its fair share of stares; a few admiring men (and women) had compared it to that of Achilles. (She always laughed it off.) A slight breeze ruffled the linen fabric of her mottled-taupe tunic, the *chiton*, which clung to her slightly from the sweat of the efforts of the surgery. Her hair was bound behind her, swept out of her eyes; she considered letting it loose, in the current fashion, but decided against it: she might have more patients coming in later, and retying it was always slightly fiddly.

She made her way south, towards the agora, stepping around passersby and over patches of mud. Drawing closer to the marketplace, the heart of Athenian commerce and culture, she scanned around for her favorite food vendor, a hunched, toothless old man named Kleitos. She picked out half a loaf of bread and a small portion of relish, smearing its thick vegetables and anchovies on the freshly cut loaf; she motioned to pay, but Kleitos pushed her away with a smile; Angela had helped his granddaughter through a difficult birth last year, and the old man's gratitude endured.

The agora was, as always, bustling with activity. Small-time politicians and rabble-rousers stood on stools and walls, shouting angrily to whomever would listen; dockworkers lugged crates of goods and amphorae of wine; vendors hawked their wares, offering truly unmissable, once-in-a-lifetime deals to each passerby; youths laughed, sprinted, wrestled, flirted. Officials hustled and bustled to and fro, wives gathered in the shade of the colonnades to gossip and giggle, the faithful made their rounds between the various temples dotting the borders of the market. It was inescapably noisy: the clamor of the yelling politicians, the clanging of bells, the whinnying of horses, the clucking of chickens all combined into something approaching a dull roar. She sat on a low wall a few paces away and sank her teeth into the still-warm bread. Angela chewed idly, appreciating the warmth of the bread and the stone beneath her. Her attention drifted from the hustle and bustle on front of her to the few birds circling in the sky and their occasional *kree, kree* calls to one another.

What did the birds see from overhead, she wondered? A city, yes; white stone and a bustling marketplace, yes; a civic population, yes; but what set Athens apart was not its citizens, but its governance. Athens was the seat, the cradle of the *dimokratía*, the rule of the commoners. No other city, in anyone's memory, had attempted so grand, so noble an experiment. It was, in practice, a flawed and oft-corrupt system; only landed males could vote, though Angela had greased a few palms and quietly cast her own. The nobility, always resentful of the power of the common people, did their best to influence the system. Bribes, favors for favors, even assassinations were common as dirt.

And yet, it worked. It meant something. Angela could see it in the faces of the citizenry. Her travels had brought her to several countries, many cities, and in each there was a varying air of despair and futility among the common people—but not in Athens. *Remove the hope of self-governance from a person, and something deep and fundamental dies inside them*, Angela mused. There was so much tyranny in the world: not twenty years before, Aléxandros, the greatest military commander the world had ever seen, had brought the Persian empire to its knees. *One tyranny replaced with another. Isn't that always the way? And even if a good man, a Cincinnatus, rises to the top and becomes the mightiest, how can he dismiss the army that brought him there? They'd have him hanging from the nearest tree before he could even give the order.*

The birds were lucky, she decided. Humans were so easy to imprison, to subjugate. You didn't even have to build cages: threaten their life, their livelihoods, their children, their sense of security, and they'd fall in line. Birds could just... fly away. Humans were stuck here, bound to an earth the extent and borders of which no man knew. She sighed. *Would that I were born in the future. There is so much to learn, and so little we know. We carry candles, yes, but there is so much dark to illuminate.*

"Fancy seeing you here, Doc." A voice roused her from her reverie. Angela turned, expression dour, but brightened when she saw the person to whom the voice belonged. A girl, young, younger than Angela, her black hair cut short, slim, skin dark by birth and made darker by the sun, with scars old and new peppering her skin. No tunic, just a strip of cloth tied tightly around her breasts and between her shoulders. A pretty face, a button nose, and wide, faintly wicked brown eyes that always darted from side to side, taking in everything there was to see.

"What did I tell you about sneaking up on me, Thäis?" She grinned. Thäis had been the youngest daughter of an intensely poor family. Her father was the neighborhood drunk: he'd work for two or three days, putting some coin in his pocket, then spend the next few weeks stumbling between bars, out of his mind with drink, while his wife barely kept food on the table, sometimes selling her favors on the street. Eventually he took a wrong turn outside of a bar and fallen into the water of the Kifissos. They had fished his body out days later. Angela had never seen Thäis express anything but contempt for the man, or anything but rage and pity towards her mother.

An impish grin spread across the younger woman's face. "You said not to do it, or I'd never step foot in your home again."

Angela laughed. "That's right, I did." She proffered the end of the bread towards the girl. "Do you want the rest of this?" Thäis took it gratefully, popping it into her mouth.

"Thanks, Doc."

"I have a name, you know," Angela deadpanned with a roll of her eyes. "We've known each other long enough."

"Whatever you say, Doc," Thäis mumbled through her mouthful of bread.

"Fine, you impudent child. What's the word? Goings-on?" Thäis always had her ear to the ground. She somehow knew who was pregnant, who had fallen ill, whose husband was getting drunk and beating them. A childhood spent scrounging for coins and nabbing the odd strip of fried food from inattentive vendors honed one's wits, Angela supposed. She was never quite sure where the younger woman slept. Probably in the bed of whichever one of her numerous paramours—both men and women—she had decided to visit that night.

Thäis hummed as she thought. "Not too much. The Koteas child has the croup. Mother seems to be handling it well, though she hasn't slept in days. A break-in near the temple of Hephaestus, a diplomat. The soldiers are turning that neighborhood upside down. Doubt they'll find anything

though, if my guess as to who did it is right." Angela gave her a stern look: thievery was no longer a part of Thäis's life, but she knew every talented thief and unscrupulous fence in all of Athens.

Angela, still in a meditative mood, flashed back to when she had first met Thäis. Angela was new to the city, walking between noble houses, looking for work, when she had heard cries of pain from a tenement. It had been a birth, a tricky one, to much-too-young a mother.

She had burst into the one-room home, spotting the grimacing, prone girl in the center of the room. She sprang into action. *A kettle*, she had barked at a gangly youth standing in the doorway. *Get me a kettle, and some cloth. Anything. Go!* The youth had turned tail and run, and Angela had thought she'd seen the last of her, but a few minutes later she had burst back into the room, some reams of ragged linen draped in one arm and a battered, half-broken kettle in the other.

They had saved the mother, just barely. Her fever had burned for three days. Angela did not leave her side. Neither did Thäis. And later, as an exhausted Angela packed up her medical supplies into her rucksack, meaning to leave and petition more nobles, a high, outraged voice at her elbow:

"You're not really going to keep wandering between these nobles' houses, right?"

"Excuse me?" Angela was taken aback by the sheer bluntness of the girl's affect.

"I've seen you. Looking for work. Petitioning the eupatridae. It's useless."

"Well..." Angela toyed with her hair in confusion. *"What do you suggest I do?"*

"Stay here," the girl replied immediately. *"We need you. There are a lot of people sick here. But go ahead, I won't stop you. Hope you have fun scurrying around, trying to cure some patriarch of his gout."* A slight sneer crossed her face. *"But get going, if you must. The villa of the Alcmaeonidae is ten minutes' walk from here. Take a right out the door and walk until you reach the Hill of the Nymphs."*

Angela had made it halfway down the street before she realized the girl was right. She looped back, finding the girl sizing up a noble who had wandered into the wrong district, no doubt preparing to pickpocket him. She clapped a hand on the girl's shoulder, causing her to jump nearly a foot in the air.

"So, where am I needed?"

From then on, there was an accord. Thäis would bring patients, most of whom still distrusted the strange, foreign-looking doctor, and would make fleet-footed runs to the agora for supplies. And Angela paid the youth what she could, or at least split the food she had, murmuring instructions during surgeries, guiding her in the making of poultices and salves, explaining the diagrams from her few dog-eared anatomical texts. Angela had guided her through her first menses, giving her tincture of poppy for the cramps and clean rags to absorb her flow.

Years later, Thäis was no longer the skinny, gangly child she had first gotten to know: she was a woman. A strange, mischievous woman, but a woman nonetheless. Sometimes, out of the corner of her eye, Angela caught Thäis making eyes at her. It made her smile, but she was old enough to be her mother: she was no cradle-robber, that was for sure. Yet sometimes, out of sheer daring, she returned Thäis's smouldering glances, which always brought a blush to the younger woman's cheeks.

They returned to Angela's home. It turned out to be a slow day; no patients showed up in the afternoon, so the women took advantage of the quiet to restock their supplies: Thäis spent the afternoon tearing long strips of linen and sewing them into bandages, while Angela sat in the

corner with mortar and pestle, mashing up herbs and stirring them thoroughly into mead: fennel, peppermint, poppyseed, beetroot, nutmeg. It wasn't the world's most interesting work, but Thäis kept her engaged with the odd nugget of gossip and an occasional raunchy story.

They split a hearty meal that evening: Angela had some talent in the kitchen, and roasted the leg of some salted goat a grateful patient had gifted her in lieu of drachmae. Thäis's eyes sparkled as the older woman placed the plate in front of her, and Angela smiled at her grateful reaction. They had wandered to the open-air theater afterwards, managing to catch most of something lighthearted and amusing—*The Birds*, they called it—by Aristophanes. By the third act, Thäis had fallen asleep on Angela's shoulder. Angela smiled and stroked the smaller woman's hair, neatening her unruly locks.

She had guided Thäis back to her home and into her bed. She couldn't remember the last time the girl had slept next to her, but she supposed she didn't mind. She removed her tunic, leaving her underclothes on to maintain a sense of propriety, and slid in beside the girl's sleeping form, draping one arm over her. And they slept.

I am flying.

I am high in the sky, forty cubits up, and I can see everything. A gleaming city. The buildings are so vast, stretching up higher than I ever thought possible, all gleaming glass and smooth metal. It takes my breath away.

Behind me I can feel machines spewing out heat, propelling me upwards. I am clad in armor from head to toe; it is heavy, strong, but I remain in the sky, surging on, faster, faster. In my hand there is some sort of weapon, menacing, long, heavy; I feel its weight in my arm and on my side, and it is comforting. I know instinctively that I can wreak terrible destruction with it, that I can tear my foes limb from limb, that I can save my friends and terrify my enemies. There is a mask over my face, protecting me from the wind, but somehow I can see through it, and superimposed over my vision are glowing sigils, numbers, target reticules, telling me all I need to know about my city, my enemies, my allies.

My allies? Yes. I can hear their voices in my ear. Crackly, compressed, yes, but it is them. I hear triumph in their voices, resolve like steel. I have never heard these voices before, but I know to whom they belong.

"Approaching the target, love!" A bright, sparkling voice, full of mischief and laughter. **Lena**, I think, and I feel a rush of affection.

"Be careful, Tracer." A gruff voice in my ear, rich, warm. **Winston**. A strong leader, principled, noble. I know this, somehow, though no one told me it.

My machines sputter behind me, and I turn them off with a flick of my wrist. I begin to fall, but no fear is in my heart: just memories of training, of how to land safely and without injury. I impact the ground hard, cracking the concrete beneath me, but my suit absorbs the impact. I am on a roof, one affording a good view of the city beneath me. My heart is racing with the freedom of flight and the fierce joy of battle.

"Always am, dear leader!" Some laughter from the rest of my team.

There is an ominous chime in my ear, and red dots project themselves onto my vision. I hear grunts of displeasure in my ear. I run forward, towards the edge of the roof, and engage the machines on my back again. I soar upwards, tracking the dots in my vision, around, twisting, curving to the left- *there*. Three enemies, men with black, vicious weapons, scanning around.

Professionally-trained, I can see: their steps are confident, self-assured, their face held up to the black metal of the weapons they carry.

One of them hears my engines and turns up to face me, with a shout. Light erupts from the end of his weapon, and I cut the power to my engines, dropping a few cubits in height. I hear projectiles sing past me. His compatriots turn, angry grimaces on their faces, but they are too late: I bring my weapon up, towards them, and with a deafening **whoosh** fire erupts from my weapon, something squat and long and vicious spiraling towards them. They scramble to get out of the way, but it is too late: my weapon impacts, and great goutts of fire bloom outward. They are caught in the explosion.

"Combatants neutralized." The voice from my throat is not my own: it is low, smooth, hard, liltingly accented. The tongue is not my Greek; I know not what it is, but I can understand it.

And then another voice—mine. Unmistakably mine. "Providing backup, Pharah. Hold your position."

I twist in the air to see who's behind me, and I behold a vision, though a shock runs through me. A figure, clad in a form-fitting suit, lined with orange, black, tan. Great golden wings behind her, carrying her up towards me, lightning-fast.

It is me. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. I am an angel, spiraling up, a staff clasped in one hand, a weapon in another.

And suddenly, a banging sound from nowhere, and Angela was yanked out of sleep by the opening of a door. She blinked, her vision blurry from the sleep, spotting Thäis's head peeking past the door of her bedroom.

"Do you ever knock, child?" Angela yawned, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"Sometimes. Rarely. Especially not after haggling some crone half-to-death for those apricots you like so much. Get up. Since when do you sleep, much less sleep in?"

"I was having a dream. A nice one." Angela swung her legs over the side of the bed, stretching before rising and throwing on yesterday's tunic. *Strange*, she thought. *So vivid. Bizarre. Sent to me by a goddess, perhaps?* She shook her head and smiled wryly at the moment of superstition. Angela was not a particularly religious sort; she visited the temples a couple of times a year, lighting incense and praying for the souls of her parents, but she had her hands too busy with the here and now to be overly concerned about the hereafter or the whims of the gods.

"Well, get up, and get something to eat, doc," Thäis retorted as Angela made her way through the door. The younger woman placed a sack of foodstuff and an amphora of well-water on the corner table. "Busy day ahead of us, I think. The Koreas child's croup hasn't improved—we should stop by there this morning, teach the mother how to remedy it. Old lady Elene is having trouble walking. Her rheumatism is acting up. And I met Harmonia's husband in the street this morning—his wife is three months along with her baby, and vomits her food up every morning. Can you do something to help her?"

Angela nodded. Harmonia was a good child; she'd make a good mother. Angela had a sixth sense about those sort of things. "There's coin in the cabinet for the food. Take a little for yourself." She emptied the sack of groceries onto the table: olives, figs, tēganitēs, and dried apricots-her favorite. She took two and popped them into her mouth, savoring the texture and the sweetness.

Angela performed her morning ritual: washing her face, cleaning her hands with her small bar of

soap, combing her hair, cleaning her teeth with a twig and some gritty paste she had obtained at the market. A deep breath, a moment of meditation, and she was ready to go. Slinging her medical tools into her sack, she slung it over her shoulder and motioned for Thäis to follow her. It was, as the girl had predicted, a busy day: the child had improved after they had plugged the doors and windows and set a large pot of water to boil. Steam was a powerful curative, Angela knew, especially for children. The old lady's pain had been ameliorated when Thäis rubbed a mint salve into her hurting joints; she had entertained the younger women with some surprisingly-ribald tales of her youth and beauty.

Harmonia's ills had proven more difficult to treat. One glance at the woman told Angela that she was severely undernourished; her skin was pale and clammy and she was slow to respond to questions. Angela had leapt into action, ensuring that she drank beetroot extract for the iron and chewed ginger for the nutrients and to remove the toxins. She had given strict instructions to the husband: something light every morning, oatmeal or warm bread, no spices, and certainly no alcohol. Angela knew that alcohol hurt infants in utero, though many of the people chose not to believe her.

The day passed in a flurry of activity. Despite the tiredness that dogged her at the end of the day, Angela rarely slept well, so the knock at the door late that night did little but rouse her from a doze. (No dreams of flying, of the blue suit or the shining city, that night.)

"Angela. Oh, praise the gods. Angela, you are needed." It was the old woman from several blocks down, Ioanna, a kind woman who always glowed with pride as she escorted her grandchildren through the streets.

"Ioanna. What... what is it?" Angela shook her head, ridding herself of the last vestiges of grogginess.

"The Uiliam villa. They need your help. Sir Reinhartos: he has been poisoned."

"Poisoned? Who would..." Angela had to force herself not to step backwards in shock. Reinhartos Uiliam—the Grey Lion, they called him, his martial and military achievements already the stuff of legend—ranked among the most beloved of the Athenian nobility. A fair and just man, a man who employed a great many citizens in his villa, a widower of some years; the citizens had lined the streets of his wife's funeral procession, eyes cast down, silent as they paid their respects. Angela had joined them, had seen the lines of sorrow on his proud, broad face. *Why would anyone do such a thing*, she asked herself internally. There were plenty of nobles for whom no commoner would shed a tear, but Reinhartos was the last man against whom anyone would hold a grudge.

"There is no time, child. Hurry. Get your things. They need you." Angela hurried to the cabinet, grabbing her urns, her case of tinctures and remedies, and the wooden box of surgical implements. She hurried into the warm night, following the old woman, her heart beating fast.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. Okay. Chapter 1 done.

This is gonna be a long one. Strap y'selves in. I'll be adding characters/tags/archive warnings as I go.

Thanks, as always, to my endlessly patient and brilliant beta reader, problematick,

who has encouraged me every step of the way. This wouldn't exist without her.

Bloodshed

Chapter Notes

TW for some graphic violence herein. *Caveat lector.*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Angela trod quickly up the stairs to the Uiliam villa. Ioanna followed behind, as fast as her old legs could carry her. She did not bother with knocking; she turned the wrought iron of the door handle and flung the door open.

The villa's atrium spoke of wealth, of old money. Well-trod marble floors, two elegant staircases curling upwards along the walls to a second story. An expensive-looking mosaic, a fanciful portrayal of a sea monster, lay inset in the center of the room, and an elaborate fresco lined the walls. Expensive vases sat on stone columns. And in the center of the room stood a gaggle of worried-looking servants and a red-faced majordomo, his hair mussed and disheveled, all of whom regarded her entrance with shock.

The majordomo spluttered. "What is the meaning of this? Who are—"

"Shut up." Angela took an impish glee in cutting the older man off. "I'm a doctor. Your master has been poisoned? Take me to him."

"Oh. Um. Forgive me my rudeness. This way, Doctor." The majordomo bowed, red-faced, and gestured for her to follow him up the stairs.

Angela turned to face Ioanna. "Find Thäis. I need her. She's somewhere in Alikokou, though I know not where. Make enough noise and she'll find you." Ioanna nodded, swallowing in apprehension. Angela followed the majordomo up the marble stairs, taking them two at a time.

Though the bedroom was dark, lit only by an oil lamp, Angela could see it was lavish, fit for any patriarch. A thick rug, its colors vivid, no doubt imported from Persia, lay in the center of the room, and on it rested a massive four-poster bed of lacquered ebony. Large, well-kept windows lined the west wall, flanked by thick silk curtains, and a painting portraying the triumph of Herakles over the Hydra was mounted on the southerly one. An elaborate frieze hung grandly over the head of the door, and a small but finely-wrought bronze statue of a lion lay regally in the corner. On the bed in the center of the room lay the figure of Reinhartos Uiliam.

Though he was prone, Angela could see that he was a monster of a man. Four-and-a-half cubits tall at least, with a chest like an ox and arms as thick as the trunk of a young tree. One eye was milky-white, punctuating a thick, marbled scar. His hair and full beard were thick, a snowy gray—as befitted the Grey Lion, with a broad nose set in a broader face. He was clad in a *chiton* and a rich purple cloak.

He looked *terrible*, Angela observed. He was convulsing, twisting into himself, taking the sheets along with him, and mumbling in a deep, gravelly voice. She approached him quietly, holding her hand to his forehead: he was burning up, his cheeks scarlet. Angela pulled back the lid of his good eye, observing the hugely dilated pupil. She swore inwardly. "*Atropa*," she spat. "Nightshade. It's bad." She turned to the majordomo, her eyes flashing and her countenance fearsome. "Go. Get water, as much of it as you can carry. Cold, from the well. The strongest liquor you can find. And

do not let any of your servants leave. Someone did this to your master. And pray to whatever gods you worship that I got here in time." Properly cowed, the majordomo nodded, scurrying out of the room, yelling for help in his new duties.

With the help of a whey-faced guard posted outside the bedroom, Angela managed to push Reinhartos onto his side. She wasted no time, scrabbling for her box of herbs and stuffing the few leaves of *helleborus* down his massive throat. She grabbed a far-too-nice vase from atop a nearby dresser, and before long, Reinhartos was vomiting, the remnants of his dinner dribbling thickly into the vase. She breathed a sigh of relief: at least now she knew it wouldn't get worse. Much worse, anyway.

Thäis burst into the room, followed by an increasingly harried-looking Ioanna. Angela did not even look up, her attention focused solely on her patient. "I didn't bring the motherwort, Thäis. Run to my home and get it. It's on the bottom shelf of the cabinet. Run as fast as you can, fleet-foot. I think he may pull through, if his heart doesn't give out. Ioanna, stay with me." She handed the old woman a small knife. "Keep him awake. If he falls asleep, he is done for. Cut him if you have to. He will forgive you." Ioanna's eyes widened, but she nodded, sinking to her knees beside Reinhartos's massive form, pinching his cheeks roughly, which elicited a groan of irritation from the prone, sweaty man. Thäis was gone between heartbeats.

Angela scrabbled through her bag. *Praise Asklêpios that I remembered to distill these poppies*, she thought hurriedly, grabbing the vial she had filled the day before and promptly pouring its contents down the man's throat. She had a small lump of activated charcoal; she stuffed that far back in his mouth, too, shutting his massive jaw and rubbing his throat to force it down. She put her ear to the man's chest: his heart was thunderous, beating much too fast, but with strength. Angela had seen nightshade poisoning before, once, in a mistress poisoned by a jealous wife. Angela had lost her.

A groan of pain from Reinhartos. Judging by the wince on Ioanna's face, she had chosen to cut the man to keep him awake. "Not too deep," Angela ordered. "Cover the wound. Don't let him lose blood. Just keep him awake." Another bout of vomiting; it landed on Angela's skirt, though she took no notice. Sweat ran down her brow, into her eyes, and she blinked it away in irritation. The majordomo returned with waterskins and a small, dusty amphora.

"Liquor?" the doctor interrogated. He nodded; Angela snatched it from his hands and poured it down Reinhartos's throat. "It will help him sweat," she explained, "and keep him vomiting. And maybe relieve the pain, just a little. He is in agony." She piled the cold waterskins around his prone form, wiping a bit of their contents on his brow and some down his throat. Another bang from the door, and Thäis, chest heaving with exertion, flew into the room, shoving the dried motherwort into Angela's hands. She nodded in gratitude. "Get a mortar and pestle. Mash it up. Hurry."

Morning came, after many hours of sweat and apprehension, and with the rays of the sun came the dull ache of exhaustion. Reinhartos's breathing and heartbeat had stabilized, and the scarlet had receded from his cheeks. Too tired to congratulate herself, Angela slumped against the wall, sliding down into a sitting position. Thäis had passed out an hour before, curled up, cat-like, on a well-upholstered divan; Ioanna, obviously bone-tired, had recused herself some hours prior. A slight knock at the door, and the majordomo crept in furtively.

"Will he... will he make it?" he asked *sotto voce*.

Angela nodded. "I think so. He is not out of danger yet; I will need to stay here and monitor his condition." She rubbed her eyes. "I need to rest. Have one of your servants stay up with him; should his breathing change, or should he start convulsing again, wake me up at once. Where can I sleep?"

"Down the hall, third door on the right," the majordomo answered quickly. "And, Doctor... I am grateful. We are all so grateful. Sir Reinhartos is a good man, a great man. He does not deserve to have his life snuffed out by some coward's poison. We will not forget what you did this evening." The doctor nodded again, too tired to formulate a response.

"Keep a close watch." She staggered out the door, heavy-eyed, opening the third door on the right to find a small but well-furnished bedroom, less lavish than that of the patriarch but still several degrees grander than her home. She shed her tunic and skirt, crawling into the bed, appreciating its cool sheets and feather-stuffed pillows, falling into a deep sleep almost immediately.

I fly, again. And there is an angel in front of me. She soars up, quick-as-a-wink, close to me.

I reach an armor-clad arm out to her waist, wrapping around it. She squeaks, and a blush comes to her cheeks. I engage the machines in my back and we soar upwards, fast, faster than any bird, like lightning across the clouds. I feel warmth in my gut, pushing upwards to my heart, and I know that I can conquer anything, as long as this angel is beside me. She lays her head on my shoulder, and a fierce joy sparks within me.

A blue light emanates from the staff in her left hand, and it runs over me, *through* me. My senses crackle, my vision sharpens. I can *feel* the enemy. I don't even need the red dots projected in front of me to know where they are. *Three of them. Beneath me. The building. Setting up artillery. Have to stop them.*

"Hold on tight," I whisper to the angel in my arms, and I cut the power to the engines on my back. We fall, slow at first, then faster, faster, the wind rattling my armor and blowing her hair wildly around her face. She clings on even tighter to me as we fall. I know, instinctively, just when to engage the engines again; their roar slows our fall at exactly the right time, and we land on the ground firmly but unharmed.

I bring a finger to my lips, gesturing towards a side door of the building in which I know the men are stationed. She nods firmly, bringing a hand to the weapon at her side. I mount mine on my back—I know I cannot use it inside, not without injuring myself, or *her* — and I reach for the long, viciously-serrated combat knife dangling from my belt.

We stride forward, I position myself to the right of the door, she to the left. Another nod from her and I spring into action, soul ringing with the white-hot rush of battle, my kick to the door blowing it off its hinges and well into the room. I smirk at my own power, then charge into the room, shoulder raised, head inclined downwards. There are three men therein, their eyes wide with fear. They bring their weapons towards me; lights flash and thunderous sounds emanate from their weapons. I feel their projectiles' impact on my suit, but with my blue armor they are but bee-stings to me.

I hit the first man, the one closest to me, with all my momentum. I hear his ribs break with the impact, and he goes down with a sickening crunch. Behind me, my angel's weapon barks, and in the corner of my eye I see one of the men buck and twist, blood blossoming from holes in his head and neck. I flip my knife so that its blade faces downwards, and I fall, all my weight behind me, his head underneath the point of its blade. There is another *crunch*, this one wet and visceral, and I hear him expire beneath me. I look up to see the third man level his weapon at my angel, and my vision grows red with rage.

The knife is still in my hand. I fling it, with all my might, at her assailant's form. It embeds itself deep into his thigh, and he moans and staggers with the pain. I rise to my feet, my armor hissing with every movement, and spring forward at him, vaulting the table between us, my fist rising to meet his jaw. I can feel the impact reverberating up and down my arm when my strike lands. He

falls to the ground, dead or unconscious; I know not which.

I lower my arm. My heart thuds in my chest. I turn to see my angel, and she is looking straight at me, shaken, yes, perhaps even a little horrified by my actions. But unbowed.

She darts forward, light, fleet of foot, a small smile curling the corners of her mouth. And she kisses the cheek of my helmet. I feel myself go red.

Angela awoke suddenly, her heart pounding. *That dream again. No coincidence, this. And such bloodshed. What does it mean?*

Sunlight streamed in through the western windows. It was well after noon, she surmised. She was surprised to note that she felt adequately rested, considering the frenetic activity of the previous night.

A slight knock at the door. "Come in," Angela called uncertainly, not quite sure of the etiquette called for in noble houses. The door opened softly, and an older woman entered, clad in a gray linen *stola*. She was of medium height, with her hair, black streaked with gray, tied behind her in a tight bun. She moved with grace and confidence, clearly borne of experience. Seeing the blonde upright in bed, she smiled.

"You're awake. Good. There is sustenance for you here." True to her word, she was carrying a tray of food, the smell of which wafted through the room: barley bread dipped in wine, as was custom, a small plate of vivid-green olives, and *staititēs* topped with honey and cheese. Angela's stomach rumbled loudly, eliciting a small smile from the older woman.

"Anatolios—the house's steward, you met him last night—told me to tell you that Sir Reinhartos's condition remains stable," she said softly, placing the tray of food on the small table next to Angela's bed.

"My name is Salōmē. Please, miss, if there is anything with which I can furnish you, do not hesitate to ask. You have done this household a great service." A smile crinkled the corner of her eyes. "Reinhartos and I have known each other for many years. I was his attendant in our youths."

"Really?" Angela queried through a mouthful of wine-soaked bread. "You traveled with him?"

Salōmē laughed, a hearty, hoarse laugh. "Oh yes. Everywhere. Persia. Macedonia. Latium. Oh, the sights I saw. Reinhartos was quite the womanizer in those days, you know. A man built like that? The maidens threw themselves at him." She gave an amused sigh. Angela blushed, despite herself. She held no outsized regard for the Athenian nobility, but she knew of Reinhartos's valor and deeds, and hearing his old servant describe his escapades was a little much.

"Tell me," Angela said, "did they find the man responsible for poisoning your lord?"

Salōmē's face fell. "No. There was a new servant, Lykourgos, who went missing yesterday evening, just as the food was served. Anatolios has sent out a detachment of guards to search for him. But Athens is a large city. He could have gone anywhere." Angela frowned, picking out an olive.

"Finish your breakfast, child," Salōmē ordered gently. "There are clean clothes in the cabinet. Please return to his side when you feel able." Angela nodded.

It was late, near midnight. Angela, not yet tired, had returned to Reinhartos's side: she picked up a waterskin, dampening a nearby towel and wiping his huge face down with it. She poured some of

the water down his throat, a little at a time so that he did not choke on it. His breathing was steady, she noted with gratitude. He might even wake up soon.

Suddenly, a shout from outside the door. The telltale clang of steel on steel, again, again, and then a cry of pain, and the sound of an armor-clad body falling to the floor. Angela froze. *The assassin. He's back.* Her blood ran cold and her skin ran with fire. She scanned the room—there were no exits. Even if she could pry the windows open, the fall would be enough to break an ankle. There was one place she could hide, she realized: she fell to her stomach, crawling under the bed, her strong arms pulling herself underneath its length and width.

Another cry of pain from outside, then silence. *Oh, no. Two guards. There would be yelling if either had lived,* Angela thought. The door swung slowly open. Her stomach clenched as if in some giant's fist: from her vantage point, she could see a pair of feet, not clad in the traditional buskins worn by the guards, but in short black leather shoes, with bloodied, curling metal blades mounted on the toes. She had never been so afraid of a pair of feet, or of anything, in her life.

The feet strode to the side of the bed. A chuckle echoed through the room. "Large, as pests go." The voice was high, cracked, unpleasant to the ear. Angela cringed. *What do I do? What do I do? What do I do, I cannot lose him not now.* Her heart hammered in her ears as she scanned around frantically for something, anything, something to distract the assailant. Maybe she could buy some time until another guard arrived, maybe something to throw, distract him—and then she saw it. The scalpel Ioanna had used to keep Reinhartos awake the previous night, lying forgotten, peeking out from the other side of the bed. No words echoed through her head now, just steely, blue determination. She shimmied as quietly as possible to the middle of the space beneath the bed, her long, sinewy arms reaching out, fingers curling around the bone handle of the scalpel, fitting firmly into her sweaty palm.

(A memory of her dream: of blue armor, of a long combat knife, of plunging strikes and victory. And a kiss.)

Another chuckle. "Not so strong now, Grey Lion." Angela saw the feet square up, tense, no doubt ready to strike. And then, a flash through her head, white-hot, a memory from the Iliad: *the tendon of Achilles.* His were unguarded. She swallowed, heard a grunt from the assailant—she had no time left, she knew, he was probably plunging whatever weapon he had down—and she threw herself to the mercy of the Fates. She flung her left hand forward, around the man's ankle, swinging the scalpel in her right hand as hard as she could, squarely into the soft part of the ankle, where thick tendon met the bone. Blood sprayed on her, its coppery stench filling the room, and a piercing scream ripped from the man's throat. She held on, though her hands were slick with red, and pressed, grunting, sawing the sharp steel of the blade through the thick fibers of the tendon. She made it more than halfway through before the blade slipped, tossed out of her grasp and into the corner of the room by the man falling to the floor.

She got a good look at his face—sallow, hook-nosed, twisted into a rictus of pain, fear, and rage. He was clad in black leather armor, expensive-looking, criss-crossed with marks of battle. She pulled herself forward, out from under the bed, yelling for help, when a solid kick from the man's good foot made contact with her head. Her vision flashed white and her ears rang, and she felt a dizzy tiredness tug at her consciousness. *No,* she swore, and she pushed forward again, her hands wrapping around the man's mangled ankle, digging in, fingernails ripping into the wound she had made moments before. Another high-pitched bellow emerged from the man; he struggled, kicking wildly at her head, but she clung on, her face curled into a snarl, lost to all thought.

With a final, mighty lunge, he kicked away from Angela's hands, his scream fading to a keening howl. She crawled forward, her hands leaving bloody prints on the fine carpet, panting raggedly, blood gushing from her aquiline nose. Her eyes fell on a dagger, wrought of banded and stippled

steel, its handle bound in the same black leather of the man's shoes. She scrambled for it, long fingers reaching out, at first barely making contact with the handle. A final push from her burning, agonized legs and she had it in her grip. She rolled to the right, away from the man's good leg, still impacting her side with frenzied, frantic kicks. She rose to her knees, her *chiton* rust-stained with her blood and that of her opponent. She stared, wide-eyed, at him, at the hatred in his face. His hands grasped the carpet, pulling himself upwards, lunging for the dagger. She pulled it back, then, with a yell, slashed forward, gripping the handle so hard her knuckles burned white.

His fist made contact with the side of her head, and again her ears rang mightily. Her vision blurred, and she nearly choked on the blood in her mouth and from her nose. She clung to her consciousness. *No. Not now. Not today.*

Father, watch over me.

She slashed again, darting forward, nearly falling over with the effort. The blade of the dagger made contact with her assailant's cheek; she felt the scrape of metal on bone, and another yell ripped from his throat. He punched again and again, but she ducked, the blows glancing off the crown of her skull. Pushing herself up with her arms—they quaked and trembled with the effort—she struck again, from the right, from the left, across, diagonally, frantically. Blood streamed from his face, but she knew they were just superficial wounds. He smiled, his grin that of a predator, and Angela quaked in fear, nearly vomiting with the adrenaline. *Gods, help me.* She put her energy into one last slash, forward, forward, towards his face—

The dagger struck true. She felt the squelching of soft tissue through the handle of the dagger. Blood spurted from the man's eye, and his scream rang deafening in Angela's ears. He fell to the floor, arms flailing in agony, the aqueous humour inside his ruined eye dripping thickly onto the carpet. She crawled towards him, her heart beating like a hummingbird's, her eyes wide with terror and determination. He raised his hands, clutching his face, moaning and twisting in pain, and Angela saw something she knew, that she knew well: the skin and musculature of his throat. She had studied the throat, the veins and arteries, having spent many hours dissecting pigs in the hope of understanding human anatomy just a little more. She *knew* where to strike.

The man's remaining good eye went wide as the blonde raised the dagger with both shaking hands, plunging it down with her last remnant of energy. He raised a hand to try to stop her, but her hands slipped past him, the blood on her arms and hands staining his palms. The dagger made contact: she felt arteries and veins pop, muscles rip, tendons snap beneath the blade's edge. Blood sprayed wildly into Angela's eyes; she shut them instinctively, yet kept forcing the blade down, down, harder and harder, her whole body singing with the effort. The man's scream broke, fading into a splutter, bubbling, choking on his own blood, his limbs thrashing slower, slower, slower, then dropping to the floor with a **thump**. He had stopped struggling.

Though blood stung them, Angela's eyes crept open. The man's throat was a gaping, ragged mess; blood, black in the half-light of the room, still pumped from the jagged wound. Angela stared, goggle-eyed, dropping the dagger; it thumped gently on the soaked surface of the carpet. She scrabbled backwards, grabbing the end of the bed, pulling herself to her knees. Another look at the corpse of the man, his destroyed throat and ruined eye, and she couldn't hold it anymore: her gorge rose and overflowed, and she vomited, heaving painfully, tears of rage and fear and horror running down her face. Her stomach emptied quickly, but it kept on heaving for some minutes afterwards. In her head there was only the thumping of her heart and the buzzing of pain and terror.

And then, a noise from the bed. She turned her head slightly, eyes widening as she beheld the figure of Reinhartos rising to a sitting position.

"Child... did you save me?" His voice was mighty, deep, resonant, like the growl of a bear.

She froze, not knowing quite how to answer the question. She eventually settled on a nod, her stomach still lurching as she wiped her mouth with her still-bloody arm.

Reinhartos pulled himself, with difficulty, out of bed, falling to his knees, his massive hands searching over the corpse of the man. He pulled at a leather string around the man's neck, snapping it. On it hung a small silver pendant: the shape of the claw of some predatory bird.

"Talon," Reinhartos growled. "They poison me, then they send an assassin to finish the job." He sized up the still-panting Angela, by now sobbing openly. "I remember you. You came in my dreams. You... you saved me. Twice." He swallowed, awe crossing his face. "Truly, you are an agent of Pallas Athena, child. She is working through you. I owe you more than I can say," he intoned, reverence in his voice.

Angela rose to her feet, shaky, like a newborn fawn. Through the windows, she caught the sight of flames on the water — *the harbor, the ships are on fire* — but staggered forward, too tired to pay further attention.

"Think... think nothing of—" She wasn't able to finish the sentence before she crumpled, unconscious. Reinhartos darted forward with a speed that belied his size, catching the slender woman in his massive arms. Fear crossed his face — *no, no* — as his giant hands scrambled to her throat, feeling for the beat of her heart. He relaxed visibly as he felt the heart beat, fast yet strong.

He looked again at the silver claw, gleaming against the blood-soaked carpet. Just then, the door burst open, and a cohort of guards burst in, weapons held at the ready. Their eyes went wide at the scene: a leather-clad assassin dead and mutilated on the floor, and the blood-soaked doctor lying unconscious in the arms of their lord.

"My—my lord?" The majordomo's voice came out as nearly a squeak.

"Call the assembly, Anatolios," Reinhartos rumbled. "Talon means to take my life. And would have, were it not Athena's grace, and for this doctor here. I will not give them a third chance. Send the messengers to all the cities. Bring every noble to Athens. And take her to my wife's old bedroom. Post four guards in front of it, and call every doctor in the district. She must live."

A scowl darkened his face. "Justice will be done."

Chapter End Notes

I don't know how I wrote all this in a day. But I did.

The next chapter will have Pharah. I swear to you.

Thank you again to problematck, the world's most patient beta reader and an endless wellspring of inspiration. Love you.

Reckoning

Chapter Notes

Rather than shoehorning explanations into the text itself, I figured it was better that I define a few terms ahead of time. To wit:

erre es korrakas - literally "go to the crows"; a pretty nasty insult, probably closest to "fuck off" or "jump off a cliff". (Since crows are scavengers, this tells the target of the insult that you hope they die and get their bones picked clean.) People apparently still say this in modern Greek, which is completely awesome.

arete - this is a tough word to translate, but the closest English approximation is "virtue" or "excellence". Future chapters will touch more on this concept and what it meant to the Greeks.

Pyanepsion - one of the Greek months. Their months were of different lengths than those of the Gregorian calendar, so there is no exact correspondence to ours, but it would have spanned somewhere between mid-October and mid-November.

daktyloi - a *dactylos*, literally "a finger", is a unit of measure, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch.

chlamys - a type of Athenian short cloak.

boule - a legislative body where indirect democracy was practiced.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Angela found herself caught halfway between dreams and waking. Pain dogged her, clawing at the corners of her brain as her consciousness ebbed and flowed: the hurt would arise, hold her in the waking world for several painful breaths, then just as quickly push her back under. Faint images and sensations bled through the haze: glimpses of a bathroom, a solemn-faced Salōmē and a blushing Thäis gently bathing her, dried blood turning the warm water rust-red; a smooth, cool hand gently affixing bandages to her aching face; the feeling of strong arms sliding her between silk sheets and onto impossibly-soft pillows; Thäis's shrill voice negotiating with some unseen petitioner ("She's fine! She needs to rest, and she can't while you're poking and prodding her. I washed her down, would you *erre es korrakas* already?!").

And then, a sustained period of consciousness. Angela tentatively opened one eyelid, then slammed it shut: the light hurt. Her face hurt, too. The ache extended from her nose, around her eyes, dripping down to her jaw, echoing horribly through her neck and down into her spine. Her face and arms throbbed with every heartbeat, and each breath produced a new variety of pain in her ribs. Visions, unbidden, shot through her mind: the sneer of the sallow-faced assassin, the red rip in his throat, Reinhartos's wide, reverent eyes, her own blood-soaked hands.

She heard the turn of a handle, the creak of a door, some padded footsteps, and forced open her eyes—then, in her corner of her blurry vision, appeared Salōmē's careworn face. At the sight of Angela's eyes, the older woman broke into a wide, grateful smile, her crow's feet crinkling in relief. "You're awake," she murmured, kneeling at Angela's side.

"Water," Angela croaked. Her throat was dry beyond dry—the flesh in her mouth clung to her

teeth and tongue when she tried to speak. Salōmē nodded, flitting to a vessel in the corner of the room and dipping a wooden ladle into it. She returned to Angela's bedside and raised the held cup to her lips, tipping it gently. The water, cold and clear, flowed over Angela's parched lips and tongue, and her eyes rolled back in her head with relief.

"Ssh. Don't speak," Salōmē whispered. "The doctors—at least the ones your young friend deigned to let in, for a short while—said you took several blows to the head. Sir Reinhartos has given strict orders that you stay in bed, and that you remain under his care until you recover."

"H—how long?" The words came to Angela thickly, painfully, like clawing something cold and slippery out of a swamp.

"Since your wounds? Thirty hours, no more. Your nose is broken, as is a rib, but you have no other injuries. You fought as Atalantē would, miss." Salōmē's hands guided a wet, cold cloth across her brow. "Reinhartos owes you his life twice over. You are a hero, miss. To me, and to him." She smiled sadly. "Had we lost him..." She shook her head, as if to forcibly expel the thought from her mind. "You saved not just a man, but a household. A family."

"I—I killed..." Despair and sorrow crossed Angela's bruised and bandaged face as she gasped out the words. *I swore an oath to alleviate suffering, she screamed internally, and for what? To take a man's life from him, to cut his throat and watch him gasp his last.*

"Hush, miss." Salōmē's voice was direct, no-nonsense, but reassuring. "You did what you had to do, and more. And my gratitude for you is immeasurable." She rose, plucking a small amphora of wine from a chest next to the bed. "Drink this. It will lessen the pain, and sleep will come soon. But you have a visitor," she said, her head turning towards the door.

Thäis's sun-kissed face poked into Angela's field of vision, her countenance at the sight of Angela's battered face a mixture of horror, worry, and relief. And after some angry remonstrances—"you could have been *killed*, you *idiot*, you absolute *fool*, why would you put yourself in *danger* like that"—the smaller woman had taken her hand and told her of all the goings-on in the streets. Word of Angela's actions had spread quickly: songs and poems telling of the fair-haired doctor, one who brought life to her allies and swift death to her foes, rang on every street and in every corner of the agora. Angela rolled her eyes, despite the pain, as Thäis giggled. She kept Angela updated as to each of her patients: the Koreas child's croup had all but vanished, and Harmonia's condition had improved markedly. As Thäis moved to leave, Angela saw unshed tears glittering in her eyes. She squeezed her hand, smiling gently. *I'll be all right, I promise*, she wanted to say, but the pain was back, and the words wouldn't come. She slipped quietly into darkness.

As Angela regained her strength and her words, she pried more nuggets of information from the ever-patient Salōmē. The vision Angela had beheld that night, of flaming ships in the harbor, was no illusion—Reinhartos's ships, his triremes and lavish quadrimeres, had been burned the night of his attempted assassination. The flames had spread to many other boats, and the insurers had been thrown into a frothy rage—all knew it was arson, yet no suspects had been sighted or apprehended. Lykourgos, the missing servant from the Uiliam villa, had been found outside the city walls, floating face-down in the Ilisos river, his throat cut so deep his head barely remained attached to his neck. Word of Reinhartos's two brushes with death had spread throughout Athens; the noble families were in an uproar, and their patrols of hired soldiers stalked the streets. Fearful of poison, Reinhartos had taken to preparing his own meals, which he found hugely enjoyable, despite Anatolios's vociferous objections. (This, Angela supposed, explained the booming laughter and the faint smells of burning she detected every morning and evening.)

After two or three days, she was out of bed, walking gingerly, leaning on the surprisingly-strong

Salōmē for support. The guards patrolling the house treated her with a deep respect, and the servants with something close to reverence. Her black eyes faded, and the bandage came off her nose: it had healed well, though when she looked close she could see the merest kink in its bridge where before there was none. She ate more, heartier, upgrading from the oat-milk mash of the first few days to teganites with honey, then to, one morning, a whitefish, sauteed in butter, fresh-caught. Angela couldn't remember the last time she had been so glad to eat fried food.

And then the next day, having replaced the bandages supporting her broken rib and changed into a fresh *chiton* and *himaton*, Angela was caught unaware by Salōmē's entrance.

"Reinhartos has requested your presence at the Bouleuterion, miss," the older woman stated matter-of-factly. Angela's eyebrows rose. Invitations to the *boule* were few and far between: in contrast with the *ekklesia*, which was open to all citizens, the *boule* was restricted to the public. Only the representatives, fifty each from the ten tribes of Athens, had the authority to attend.

"Did he... say why?" Angela furrowed her brow, which provoked a faint ache.

"No, miss. He means to give a speech, but I know nothing of the subject. Presumably it is about what you and he... went through." Salōmē proffered a folded, umber-colored *chlamys*. Angela took it in her hands, inwardly marveling at the thickness and rich texture of the wool.

"I suppose I must, then." Angela's voice was cool, belying the apprehension she felt. Salōmē nodded.

Reinhartos stood in at the entrance to the Bouleuterion, gazing eastward from its position on the west edge of the agora. The wind was high: his thick, grey hair fluttered, buffeted, and his purple *himation* billowed out behind him, fastened firmly to the rest of his clothing with a heavy gold brooch bearing the face of a lion. Though it was warm, the clouds covered the sky; Pyanepsion had just arrived, and the rainy season was imminent. He shook his head, striding through the arch of the entrance behind him.

The Bouleuterion was, by Athenian standards, not a lavish building, but impressive in its own way. Staggered rows of tiered seating, lined with teak benches, encircled a central dais, forming a small amphitheater. The ceilings were high, so as to allow a speaker's voice the room to carry to all corners of the chamber. Paintings of Greek heroes of legend—the trials of Herakles, the voyage of Iásōn and the Argonauts, Atalantē's wounding of the Calydonian Boar—lined the main wall behind the dais.

The Athenian representatives milled about in the chamber, each tribe's leaders mingling and greeting the other. Each of the ten tribes had sent appointed citizens to speak for their interests: some young, brash soldiers, some eloquent, paunchy middle-aged merchants, some elderly nobles, clearly displeased at having been dragged from their homes.

Reinhartos strode to the center of the room.

"Men of Athens. I thank you for heeding my call. Know that I, Reinhartos Uiliam, would not summon you were it not urgent. Please allow me to begin by beseeching the goodwill of every god and goddess upon you, men of Athens, upon your homes, your families, and upon our city herself."

The tales Angela had heard of the skill of his speeches had not been exaggerated, she realized. His voice was strong and his rhetorical devices clever, if a touch rustic. *A diplomat's tongue in a warrior's body*, she thought. *Small wonder his foes want him dead.*

He thrust a hand into a fold of his tunic and withdrew a small silver charm on a broken leather strap—the eagle's claw he had removed from the corpse of the dead assassin.

"You know, good people, the significance of this charm. You have heard the tales of Talon, as have I. You may consider them exaggerations, stories to galvanize young recruits and impress upon the citizenry the importance of vigilance." The claw dangled from its leather strap, comically tiny next to Reinhartos's outsized hand, twinkling in the sun.

"But I do not. I have fought them before," he rumbled, "on Kerkyra, on Lefkada, on Zakynthos, twoscore years past. I found them there, sheltering the pirates that dogged our ships and slew our sailors." His jaw worked, as if still in the grips of his battles. "I deemed them little more than mercenaries, for that, men of Athens, is what they were: an assortment of criminals, barely more organized than a common street gang. I scattered them then. They took my eye"—a murmur ran through the hall at this revelation—"and I? I took their swords, their ships, their heads."

"I believed they were a vanquished foe like any other," Reinhartos declaimed. "Many are the enemies of Athens who have fallen beneath my heel. And then, not a week ago, I found myself laid low by a coward's poison. A servant, perhaps bribed or coerced, slipped *atropas* into my evening repast. Noble Asklêpios guided the hands of a doctor"—here a mighty hand gestured in Angela's direction, and hundreds of eyes turned to follow it. Angela prayed that the ground would swallow her up. "—and my life was spared." He looked at Angela, gratitude shining in his face.

"But the gods had not finished working through the good doctor yet," he bellowed. "A man, a Talon assassin, crept into my home—my *home!* — and slew the guards posted outside my bedroom. He would have succeeded in killing me, men of Athens: the poison had not yet left my veins. And this doctor, whom no one would have thought a warrior, slew him: ambushed him unawares, as he readied to slip his steel between my ribs." He brandished again the Talon talisman in his hand. "I found this bound around his neck. Great Zeus *Semaleus*, giver of signs, has sent me a missive. I know who strikes at me, gentlemen. It is Talon. Whether of fear of feeling my wrath, or simply of base desire to make me an example: it matters not. They would have me *dead*," he roared, the color growing in his cheeks. "*Dead*, in my *home*." His voice thundered through the hall; all were silent, every eye fixed on him.

"Their agents set flame to my ships, no doubt thinking I would remain here, waiting for another assassin's chance to slit my throat. But I"—and here he thrust out his massive hand, his fingers straining, as though crushing the windpipe of an invisible assailant—"I shall not sit and wait to die. I shall ride across land, north, to the coast, to the fortress of Ilios. I will bring the forces of Athens, I will assume command there, and I will strike at Talon. The sea captains have averred that Talon controls once-noble Kythira; there can be no better position from which to attack than Ilios."

Murmurs ran throughout the hall. Angela had heard whispers of the abandoned fortress of Ilios: built by a long-ago king during the war of the Persian Mardonius against Thrace. It had served its purpose, but was deemed too expensive to maintain.

"Some of you"—and here he paused, cracking a gigantic smile—"may not care for me, or my family, or my actions. This I cannot help. Not am I particularly interested in convincing you of my personal merits. But know this," he said, his aspect darkening, all traces of humor gone: "*know* that, should I fall, Talon will not cease their onslaught. They may find other men to kill, other families to hound, other ships to burn, yes. Perhaps in our city, perhaps in others. But you are Athenians, the world's only free men," he boomed, his finger thrust accusatorily at the representatives seated around him. "And for that, Talon despises you. Had they the armies, they would see us all broken, our heads on the chopping block, our wives raped and rendered as concubines, our children in chains."

A pause, a turn, a few dignified steps.

"Join me, men of Athens. Back me with your word and with your swords, and I shall render Talon into merely a memory." He flung down the silver bauble and stamped on it with a mighty foot. "They shall no longer be a threat: all their bravado shall break beneath my fist, and within a generation they will be merely a story to frighten errant children."

The chamber was silent, for a moment, then broke into applause. The younger men, and those clad in military costume, rose to their feet, shouting in approbation, yet others remained seated, applauding perfunctorily or not at all.

The next man to address the assembly rose.

"Noble Reinhartos, you are a man of honor and of passion. And I know I speak not only for myself, but for all of Athens, in rendering my deepest thanks to Apollo *Apotropaios*, averter of evil, for the fact that you still walk among us." His diction was flawless, his accent refined; Angela could tell instantly that this was a man of wealth, of a childhood spent learning from the most expensive tutors.

"Praxilites, of the Alcmaeonidae," Salōmē whispered in Angela's ear. "They say he is next in line to become *archon*, the youngest ever. He has a way of impressing the right people."

"But not you?" asked Angela, her eye fixed on his figure, on the swishing motions of his gleaming-white *chiton* and *himation* as he made a particularly plaintive gesture in the service of a rhetorical point. He was a short man, but a handsome one, with a well-trimmed black beard accentuating his olive skin and the dark flash of his hazel eyes.

"He is a man... of a temper," Salōmē said carefully. "There are stories... well, it is not my place to comment on rumors. But know that I encouraged my great-niece not to take a position in his household. They are not... they are not treated well." Angela nodded.

"But, men of Athens," continued Praxilites, "Reinhartos's action is not one we have the means to support at this hour. We have but just expelled Demetrius of Phalerum; our *dimokratia* is weak, having been freed so recently from its chains. No attack on such a noble representative of Athens may be tolerated, of course, and my sword shall be the first to the throat of the men responsible: but to dispatch the troops of our city, in this time of nigh-unparalleled vulnerability, on no more than a hunch would be to leave us—our art, our libraries, our women and children—crucially unguarded." Murmurs of assent ran throughout the hall, and Reinhartos scowled. "And to grant one man—a noble man though he be—the power and the troops to wage a war of his own strikes me as antithetical to the spirit of our *dimokratia*." Angela thought she saw the faintest shadow of a smirk cross the younger man's face, but when she blinked, it was gone.

He continued on, invoking the names of various gods, engaging in subtle but elegant turns of rhetoric. Reinhartos's scowl deepened. *And here we see the downsides of the democratic method*, Angela thought. *Any of these men may be the next beneath Talon's blade, but honeyed words now can distract from all the imagined steel of the future*. Praxilites's verbiage persisted on for many minutes, but he eventually retired from the dais, to strong and sustained applause.

Further representatives took their chance to address the *boule*. A few backed Reinhartos—one young man pledged his support to Reinhartos so profoundly that, as he left the dais, Reinhartos, teary-eyed, enveloped him in a hug so massive as to nearly suffocate him—but, as the speakers went on, it became clear that Reinhartos's supporters were a minority. The afternoon stretched on as new representatives took their opportunity to call for calm, to suggest for investigatory committees, to urge a vote of the people.

Evening came, and a vote was called to allow the troops that Reinhartos requested. Angela grit her teeth—no counting of hands was required to tell that he had lost.

Reinhartos looked pained, Angela surmised as she approached, Salōmē at her side. His manner was distant; he regarded the sky with a dark, ruminative mien. But as the blonde doctor walked into his view, his face brightened.

"Doctor Angela Zeigla," Reinhartos boomed. "The subject of so many legends and tales." His one good eye twinkled. "I would introduce myself, but, unless my memory deceives me, we have already met."

"It is good to see you healthy, sir," Angela said, with a deferential half-bow. "Few survive the poisoning of *atropas*. I am pleased to see that it takes more than a few berries to fell the Grey Lion." Reinhartos threw his head back and laughed heartily, and Angela allowed a smile to cross her face.

The man suddenly lowered himself to one huge knee. Some surrounding nobles gasped, and Salōmē's jaw literally dropped. Even on one knee, his head was level with Angela's.

"Doctor," he near-whispered, though a whisper for the giant was akin to the normal speaking voice of any other man—"I depart to Ilios tomorrow, with a small detachment. I beg of you—please, accompany me on my journey." Angela's eyes went wide with surprise.

"My foes shall attempt to take away my life again. I shall not provide them the opportunity. I must ride to Ilios alone, with or without the support of the *boule*."

"But... but why me?" asked Angela. "I am but a doctor of the people. Your staff of physicians has knowledge far beyond mine."

"Two times have you saved my life, Doctor," he rumbled hoarsely. "Your hands are guided by the healing of Asklēpios and the heroism of Pallas Athena. The gods have sent you to me. I shall not reject their gift."

"My patients," Angela stammered. "I cannot..."

"Should you join me, the physicians of my household shall be ordered to attend to the common people in my absence," Reinhartos intoned gravely. "I have heard tell of your deeds. Your *arete* has not gone unnoticed, and I would not ask you to accompany me would it prove a disservice to my city."

"Your safety and comfort will be assured alongside me," he averred. "Faithful Salōmē shall be your lady-in-waiting. And there is a warrior, a recent arrival at my court. She"—*she?*, Angela thought, incredulously—"shall be as your shadow." He turned his massive head towards a solitary figure leaning against the hewn wall of the Bouleuterion. "*Fareeha!*"

The figure turned. She was tall, taller than Angela by five or six *daktyloi*. She was clad strangely: a white linen robe was wrapped tightly around her figure, not loosely, as was the Greek fashion, and above the robe she wore strange armor—not a solid piece of leather, but composed of thick straps, overlapping, in multiple layers, bound together with thick iron studs. Her robe, cinched around her waist with a thick belt, ended little more than halfway up her thighs, revealing long, muscular, bronze legs. A scar, long and ragged, cut a pale path up her left leg, from calf to thigh.

On her back was strapped a sword, but a strange one. Its handle was long, longer than that of any Greek sword Angela had ever seen, more than long enough to accommodate a two-handed grip.

But the blade was truly bizarre—thirty *dactyloi* long, it curved wickedly in the middle, something halfway between sickle and sword. Its metal was dark and burnished. It was not a weapon for practice, or even defense, Angela could tell; this was forged for the battlefield, to take limbs and lives. It looked vicious, sinister, vaguely bestial. Beneath the strange sword was strapped a bronze shield, magnificently decorated despite the many blows that dotted its face: Angela thought she perceived emblazoned upon it the outline of the head of a bird of prey.

Her obsidian-black hair brushed the tops of her shoulders, and several braids hung down near her face, encircled with exceptionally-wrought gold bands. Further golden bands encircled her right wrist and left bicep, their shine accentuating the russet glow of her skin. The muscle and sinew of her arms spoke of an immense strength; even among the men she had treated, Angela could remember few whose physique spoke of such physical potential. Her face was regal, her skin smoother than Angela expected any soldier's to be—and around her right eye there curled a tattoo, one line jutting down parallel to her noble nose, another curving away, across her high cheekbone, spiraling into a curlicue near the corner of her eye.

She was, in short, radiantly beautiful. There is a strange phenomenon when those of true, divinely-gifted beauty approach ordinary mortals: time, trickster that it is, seems to slow down, and all communication between mortals ceases, muted, its beholders thrust inside themselves to grapple with whatever emotion said beauty provokes, whether lust, rage, or concupiscence. Beauty is an *invasion*, an attack upon the senses: like a sword to the throat, it cannot be ignored, denied, bargained with—it merely *is*, and all in its presence must submit to its owner.

For a moment, Angela found herself dizzy, as though standing on the precipice of something very tall and sheer. She exhaled slowly, only then realizing that she had been holding her breath, and staring.

The woman—Fareeha—leveled her gaze at Angela, sweeping up and down, not meeting her eyes, but taking her in from head to toe, from blonde hair and bruised face to the hem of her chiton and the leather of her sandals. The eyes—dark, unreadable, with irises the color of mahogany—seemed to strip her bare. Angela felt dissected, examined, scrutinized. She searched the woman's face for any reaction, any sentiment, but saw nothing: not interest, not boredom, not even contempt. Angela perceived the other's woman's fearsome beauty mutely, feeling bizarre stirrings of panic within her, as though she was a child again, and a tutor had asked her a question to which she did not know the answer.

It was only much later that she realized she *had* been asking herself a question, one that she indeed could not answer: ***Why does she seem so familiar?***

A smile crossed the massive face of Reinhartos. He clapped a massive hand on the strange woman's shoulder; Angela cringed instinctively, but she seemed not to notice the impact. "She speaks no Greek. She was a captain in the barracks of Alexandria before she came to me. A fighter, like her mother, the Falcon." His hand returned to his side. "I have instructed her—assuming Arisenos's Egyptian is as good as he says it is, which I doubt—to guard you with her life." He turned to Fareeha, and spoke slowly, no doubt hoping to bridge the language gap: "Fareeha. Angela. Protect her."

The black-haired woman glanced momentarily at the giant to her side, then returned her gaze to Angela. She gave a near-imperceptible nod.

Angela moved to say *no, no, your fight is your own* — and then, in the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Fareeha. Meeting her eyes. And all her no's, all her reasons, all her excuses froze, and melted to nothing, like snow caught in the morning sun. She heard a voice in her ears, and was mildly surprised to realize it was her own:

"Yes. I will travel with you."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to problematikk, who not only helps me whip my prose into shape, but also is an endless source of wonderful ideas and characters when I find myself stymied (which is often). There is no way I would have gotten this far without you. ♥

Departure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was a hot, dusty day. Grit and dirt blew around the group of travelers assembled before the Dipylon Gate. Oxen, attached to wagons and carts, mooed plaintively; servants and slaves packed and loaded crates and bags full of tradable goods; merchants and traders stood in small circles, talking and arguing about doubtlessly-pressing concerns. Birds circled overhead, attracted by the commotion, and a few curious passersby stood and stared at the ruckus.

Angela, drawing close to the gaggle of people and wagons, was having trouble. In her arms was the chest containing all the belongings she thought to take to Ilios. And it was heavy: not only was it crammed full of her luggage—books, herbs, vials of tincture and oil, scalpels, saws, and perhaps too many clothes—it was wrought of heavy ebony, studded with iron and copper. This, in addition to the bag of essentials tied to her back, made her progress slow: her arms ached, and she had to stop every few hundred paces to catch her breath. Thäis, following a few paces behind her, conspicuously neglected to offer help, at which Angela found herself repressing irritation.

And then, as she neared the wagons, a tap on her shoulder, and the figure of Fareeha standing behind her, implacable and silent, shield and curved sword strapped to her back as always. Angela, turning to see the source of the tap, jumped half out of her skin when she spotted Fareeha. As she attempted to compose herself, she noticed that Fareeha was holding one arm out, clearly offering to take the chest from her.

“Fareeha! You—you don’t have to do that. I have this.” *I do not actually have this*, she thought ruefully. *My pride is getting in the way.*

Fareeha flexed her fingers, assuming an especially skeptical look, obviously not here to take no for an answer.

“Fine,” Angela groaned. “But it’s heav—“

Fareeha took the handle in two fingers and, with practiced grace, swept the chest up from the ground, swinging it upward and around her body, passing it to her other hand nigh-unnoticeably, it coming to rest lightly on her back despite its weight and heft. Despite its considerable weight, she handled it as though it were built of straw. Angela could only blink and stare, not quite believing the other woman’s strength. She managed somehow to meet Fareeha’s eyes—and there she saw a smile. Halfway to a smirk, yes, but a smile, revealing gentle dimples on the corners of her cheeks. And Angela forgot every word she knew, staring at Fareeha, and blushed down to her toes.

Fareeha's smile widened, and she walked off towards the wagons, Angela's case in tow.

Still a little flustered, Angela turned to Thäis, who still remained pointedly silent. Angela thrust her hands in the pockets of her chiton. "I guess this is goodbye, child."

"Guess it is," Thäis mumbled, not meeting her eyes.

"I wish you were coming—but I can't let you. It'll be dangerous, and the neighborhood needs you," Angela continued ruefully. "But I know you're up for the task. If you run into something nasty—if old man Nikandros's leg goes gangrenous, like I think it might—run to the Uiliam villa. They'll have everything you need."

"I know." Thäis was looking upwards now, at the lazy circles traced by the flights of the birds overhead.

"You'll stay out of trouble, right? The neighborhood trusts you, and they need—"

"Oh, to the crows with what *they* need," Thäis spat. "What about me?" Angela blinked, taken aback. She waited for the younger woman to continue, but she did not.

"What about you?" she asked softly.

Thäis turned towards Angela, and Angela realized that the younger woman's eyes were filled with tears. "You **idiot**," she spat. "You are leaving me, gallivanting halfway across Greece, for what? For glory? To tag along at the Grey Lion's side? You're throwing away all the goodwill you've built here, Angela. And you didn't stop to ask me whether I *wanted* you to go, did you? I wonder if you even—"

Thäis froze, her words dropping away like pebbles into a ravine. Her attention was fixed upon something behind Angela's head. Angela paused, still wounded by Thäis's thorned words, then turned her head to follow the younger woman's gaze, spotting a figure, waving enthusiastically, in front of an ancient, rickety wagon.

"That absolute **fucker**—" Thäis's tears vanished as she stormed towards the figure, in what was obviously high dudgeon. Angela followed, in somewhat of a daze. *She called me Angela. She never calls me Angela.*

"YOU!" bellowed Thäis, as she drew close to the figure and his cart. Angela had a better view of him now: he was tall, rail-skinny, clad in a stained and strangely singed chiton. His light-colored hair was jagged, haphazard, as though it had been cut by three barbers who disagreed on many fundamental aspects of the art, and it boasted several ragged, burnt chunks. His eyes were wide and his smile was rakish; he might have been handsome, were it not for his ruined teeth and a sinister, manic aspect to his grin. He was shirtless, though he bore a backpack on his back; the straps ran over his chest, and dangled with all sorts of strange metal trinkets and gewgaws. One of the man's legs was missing beneath the knee; in its place was one of wood, attached to his thigh with a series of straps. A strange smell, of sulfur and brimstone, strong enough to make Angela's eyes water, emanated from the man and his cart.

"**Junkrat!** By Athena's grace, where did you muster up the balls to show your face in public again?" screeched Thäis.

"Thay. Thay. Mate. My friend. Hold on a tick. I can explain everything," the man stammered.

"You burnt down the blasted safehouse," Thäis growled, darting towards him, her right fist clenched in aggression.

"It weren't my **fault**, Thay," he yelped, cringing away from the smaller woman's fist. "The Blues found us. They sent in mice. Mice, I tell you! With strands of wheat strapped to em. On fire, they was! On fire, Thay! And one of the sodding mice wandered over m'stockpile of resin. And, well, shit went awry, I mean, you understand, don't y — *MMPH!*"

Thäis had slipped a slender ankle behind his, and pushed forward with all her weight, her right hand coming up to wrap around the taller man's throat. He impacted the side of his wagon with a *whoosh*; a series of metallic crashes emerged from inside. A massive man, face clad in a leather mask, his huge belly poking out grandly, moved to pull Thäis off of Junkrat, but she shot him a look that could have shattered glass.

"Why are you **here**?" she hissed, her eyes bright.

"Little ol' me? For upright and honest reasons. And I'm not called that name, Thay, c'mon. It's Faukes, eh? Nice, fancy-like name, Iakobos Faukes. Perfectly legitimate. Heard a merchant expedition was traveling north. Ain't up to nothin—just selling goods. Lawfully acquired goods. Sometimes, uh, found goods. But not a plot or a score on my mind, Thay. Honest. Turned over a new leaf, honest, honest. Legit name, for legit work." Thäis squeezed, producing a squawk. "Can't breathe, Thay. Thay, please."

Thäis brought her hand away from the man's throat, and for a moment he relaxed, rubbing at the mark her hand had left. But then her hand returned to his throat; he impacted the side of his cart again, and a strangled gargle emerged from his voice box as her fingers tightened around his neck. The massive bodyguard emitted a displeased rumble, yet did not move to pry her off.

"If you," she breathed, her voice low and resonant, "if you let one hair on her head"—and here she jabbed towards Angela with her free hand—"one FUCKING hair on her head come to harm... Junkrat, I don't care if you weren't involved, if you weren't fighting... I don't care if you were ten leagues away. If she gets hurt..."

She paused, her eyes narrowing. This man—Iakobos, or Junkrat, Angela supposed—had assumed the color of milk, and was quavering like a leaf in a high wind.

"If I find you well, and her hurt... by the gods, by Zeus himself, I will gut you, and I will drag you into the agora, and I will string up you with your own intestines. Do I make myself clear?"

Junkrat nodded so frantically Angela feared the tendons in his neck would snap.

The bodyguard moved forward to pull Thäis off of the smaller man; spotting him coming, she released the man's throat, and his eyes evinced fervent gratitude. "Keep an eye on this one. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him," she muttered to Angela, ignoring Junkrat's outraged protests.

She drew herself up before Angela again, her prior anger flashing in her eyes, but just as quickly vanishing again. (In the background, Angela heard Junkrat's voice rise in outrage: "*Why d'ye let people **do** that to me? What do I **pay** you for if not to **stop** people trying to crush me voicebox?*", met only by a noncommittal grunt from the giant bodyguard.)

"Doc—" Thäis sighed. "Forget it. I know I can't convince you. Just... just come home safe, okay?"

"I will, Thäis," Angela replied softly. "It's on you to care for our patients now, okay? Keep a close eye on Reinhartos's doctors. They're book-smart, but don't be afraid to tell them when they're wrong." A pause. "I know you're up to the challenge. I've taught you what I can, but there's so much knowledge you can only acquire first-hand." She raised her hand to the younger girl's shoulder. "I know you're ready. I paid off a few months' rent on my place: it's yours until I return. There are some drachmae in the cupboard. Seek out Anatolios if you need more: he has orders to provide you what you need to care for the neighborhood."

"Doc..." Angela saw the tears rise in Thäis's eyes and begin to spill. Quick-as-a-wink, Thäis was in her arms, in a crushing hug, shuddering with the occasional sob. Angela held her for a while, stroking her hair, until she pulled back, wiping her eyes.

Angela leant forward and gave her a kiss, a chaste and brief one, on her sun-kissed lips. Thäis went beet-red.

"Good luck, young one. Save some lives for me, yes?" Thäis looked like she was about to say something else, but just nodded.

Thäis caught sight of Fareeha over Angela's shoulder and stomped forward to the tall Egyptian.

"You. You'd *better* watch out for her. She's special. To everyone. To me." Fareeha looked at the younger woman, face betraying no understanding. A small sigh from Thäis. "Ugh. Strong, silent type, I guess." Angela nonetheless saw the younger woman sneak an appreciative glance at Fareeha's muscular arms. She turned for one last look at Angela.

"Bye, Doc." A sad wave, and bronzed, sandaled feet on the ground, and she was gone in a blur of skinny arms and legs. Angela watched her go, her heart heavy. *Watch over her, Apollo. Guide her hands, Asklêpios*, she prayed. She turned, following in Fareeha's footsteps, towards the thickest gathering of wagons and merchants.

Angela glimpsed Reinhartos's unmistakable, massive form standing in the center of the milieu.

"Doctor!" he boomed. "Your presence brings a song to my heart. Come. Meet my nephew." He gestured to a short, stocky youth standing to his right. "This is Keteus. Kete, for short." He clapped a hand on the younger man's back, eliciting a wince and a slight stagger from the blow. "The son of my dearly departed sister."

Keteus looked up, meeting Angela's eyes, and immediately dropped the reed and parchment with which he was writing. "Oh. Shit. Oh. I'm sorry." He scrabbled around in the dirt, retrieving his writing implements, then returned to his feet, dusting off his hands on his chiton and extending one to Angela.

"Keteus Uiliam at your service, miss." He stuttered slightly, yet attempted to keep his composure. He was of less-than-average height, with baby fat that still clung to his belly and the curves of his face. Angela sensed that he would be handsome one day, but today was not that day: he looked pampered, uncomfortable, faintly out of place but trying his hardest nonetheless. "You are the doctor of whom they speak? Who saved my uncle's life twice over?"

"I am," she said, inclining her head respectfully. "But please know that the stories are wildly exaggerated. Your uncle's remarkable physique saved him from the poison, and the gods' blessing saved him and I from..." She trailed off, as the memories were beginning to claw their way back into her head: the scent of blood, a steel scalpel ripping into a tendon, the scream of the assassin as she took first his eye, then his life.

"Nonsense!" bellowed Reinhartos, snapping Angela out of her reverie. "You should have seen her, nephew of mine. In another time and place, she could have been an Amazon. She holds both life and death in her hands. So watch your step around her, eh?" He gave Keteus another slap on the shoulder, causing him to drop his reed and patchment again.

"Doctor. Please place your things in this wagon. You shall ride with me. I must stay somewhat incognito, so young Keteus is the face of this expedition. We are simply a merchant caravan, out of Athens, seeking to ply out goods," he explained, stepping over the wagon's seats towards the cargo area in its rear. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "The nobility believes that I have sequestered myself in my villa. We will see how long that lie lasts before someone discovers my absence." He sounded pleased at the notion of such subterfuge, Angela thought. Fareeha lifted the chest of Angela's belongings in Reinhartos's direction: he also took it as though it weighed nothing, Angela noted. *Am I the only one not possessed of superhuman strength here?* she whined inwardly.

Before too long, the merchants and bodyguards assumed their positions in their wagons, assembling into a ragged line before the towers that flanked the gate. With assistance from one of Reinhartos's outstretched arms, Angela made her way into the wagon; Keteus and the coachman sat in the front, Reinhartos sat behind them, his bulk easily taking up a whole row of seats, and Angela and Fareeha sat behind him. Fareeha maintained a respectful distance from Angela, the blonde noted.

With some shouts from the head of the line, the gates creaked open, and they set off. The oxen complained at first, but settled into a steady, rambling gait. It was a well-built wagon, Angela noted; she had spent many hours in shoddily-crafted ones, ones in which every bump or rattle made its way through the chassis and into the bodies of the unfortunate passengers—but this one held remarkably steady, even on the uneven surface of the road leading out of Athens. The heat was oppressive: Reinhartos began wiping his enormous brow with a handkerchief, and Angela pulled her chiton away from the sweat of her body, hoping to ventilate herself just a little better. If Fareeha noticed the heat, she gave no indication. *That's right, she's from Egypt*, Angela found herself thinking. *They say it is far hotter there. I wonder if she misses it.*

Angela found herself possessed with the urge to look back as they left; the struts and flapping cloth obscured her view out of the wagon's rear aperture, but if she craned her head, she could catch a glimpse of Athens, of its high, majestic walls, of the columns and stucco and marble of the buildings. The road was dusty and ancient, a sand-colored artery carving a path through the rolling hills of the countryside surrounding Athens, and in the distance she could see two of Athens's great mountains, Parnitha and Pentelicus. She prayed a silent prayer: *Goodbye, my city. Be well. Be safe. Take care of Thais. I will be home before too long.*

The wagon trundled and bumped along, and before she knew it, Athens had vanished to a speck in the distance.

The line of wagons, horsemen, and the odd unlucky slave forced to walk behind a cart made good progress out of Athens. The sun hung low in the sky when Reinhartos gestured to the coachman to stop. He leant out of the wagon and bellowed a hearty "halt!" to the rest of the caravan. Soon they had circled the wagons, and servants and slaves (and a perhaps-too-enthusiastic Junkrat) began preparing a fire in the center of the space delimited by these wagons. Merchants and their attendants disembarked from their wagons, rubbing their sore feet and hindquarters with expressions of relief.

Dinner was a stew, prepared by a jolly Reinhartos. A dented copper cauldron emerged from Junkrat's caravan, and, after a washing in the nearby brook to remove its queer sulfurous smell, it was placed over the fire. Water, lentils, honey, olive oil, vegetables, seeds of coriander, and some salted pork went in the pot, and before long the outdoors was suffused with the smell of gently cooking food. Angela found her mouth watering: the day's journey had been long and tiring. Reinhartos handed out dented but serviceable tin bowls and served all who came forward, obviously overjoyed by the chance to feed so many hungry mouths.

The stew was adequate, if a bit underseasoned, Angela decided. Fareeha evinced similar hunger: within a few minutes, she had wolfed down her whole portion, and approached Reinhartos for seconds, which he dispensed with pleasure. *I wonder what her favorite dishes are*, Angela ruminated. *She's a closed book. Not just because of the language barrier: she could easily make herself understood. She just does not wish to.* The woman was vexing: having a shadow, and a frighteningly beautiful one at that, was going to take some getting used to.

"I wonder if you can understand me," Angela murmured to Fareeha. "Something tells me you know more than you're letting on." She snuck a glance at the taller woman's face; though it betrayed no understanding of her words, Angela couldn't help but stare a little, watching the lights

from the fire play over her face, casting small lights on her glossy, night-black hair. They both knew that Angela was staring; Angela decided she didn't care. Maybe she even liked it.

Angela sipped from a small amphora of wine, one of several she had brought along. Her alcohol tolerance was low, much lower than most of her countrymen's, but she liked the stuff anyway. She inclined the bottle to the woman beside her; Fareeha gave her a quizzical look, but took the amphora anyway, taking a swig and wiping her mouth.

"You like it?" Angela asked. "A family near me brews their own. They usually had little coin to pay me, but they were always willing to trade in wine. Not the worst arrangement I've ever negotiated." She took another swallow; most Greeks diluted their wine, but Angela took no stock in the practice. It was sweet, flavorful, red: the aftertaste reminded her of the sweet yet bitter edge that blackberries left in the mouth. Fareeha gave no indication that she particularly cared for the wine one way or another, but Angela thought she saw her shoulders drop a little in relaxation. *That's good enough praise, I guess.*

"I haven't traveled outside the city in a long time," the blonde murmured, ever-so-slightly dizzy from the wine. "I did, in my youth, but as I got older I got more attached to having a place to stay." She pulled her legs closer to her. "I already miss my apartment. And my assistant." She remembered the hurt in Thaïs's eyes and the sting of her words.

"But I'm glad I'm here. I like talking to you," she blurted out, shifting her gaze forward, looking into the middle distance. "A one-sided conversation, to be sure, but better than talking to myself." *I have had... perhaps too much wine,* she lamented inwardly. Her eyes went wide when she realized that she was fighting off a sudden urge to put her arm around Fareeha's shoulders. *Where is this coming from? I have blushed seventeen times today, like some infatuated teenager.*

She leaned back, instead, taking in the whole of the caravan. She watched as the dozen or so accompanying soldiers and mercenaries conferred, wearily organizing watches and patrols; she did not envy them the task one bit after a long, hot day of travel. The few children from the assorted wagons ran around the circled wagons, engaged in some sort of game of tag, giggling and screaming in their high-pitched way. Angela smiled. She had no children of her own, and no plans to do so, but she always got along well with children, sometimes more so than adults: they trusted more freely during her visits as a doctor, and were far more grateful after having been attended to.

From her left, she heard Salōmē and Reinhartos engaged in an intense conversation, and leant slightly to listen more closely. A glance over her shoulder revealed Reinhartos scrutinizing a map draped haphazardly over the top of a crate, lit by a nearby oil lamp; Salōmē stood slightly to his right, looking on with a skeptical expression.

"...west, through Corinth for supplies and whomever else we can convince to come with us," Angela made out, Reinhartos's stentorian voice being easy to eavesdrop upon. "Then southwest from there—should we stop at Argos?" Angela saw Salōmē give a noncommittal shrug. "We will see how our supplies hold up, then. Beyond that, south, to Tegea, and then to Sparta, where I shall raise what troops I can. Then onto the peninsula, through Asopos. And then we shall be in the shadow of Ilios." With a satisfied smirk, he rolled up the map.

"And if you cannot raise troops at Sparta. What then?" Salōmē's line of questioning was acute, perhaps too acute for her station, Angela thought. *But then again, they have known each other for decades. Perhaps they are more friends than master-and-servant at this point. And besides,* Angela thought, watching Reinhartos's huge forehead wrinkle as he contemplated the older woman's words, *Reinhartos is not the sort to turn away sagacious advice, no matter how humble its source.*

"I have a long history with the Spartans. I would wager I am the Athenian held in highest regard by the *gerousia*," he said proudly, placing massive hands on his massive hips.

"They stayed pointedly neutral during the wars against the Macedonians," Salōmē pointed out. "What guarantee have you that your words are honeyed enough to lure them out of their precious neutrality?"

"The Spartans, for all their many faults, do not easily forget the favors they owe," Reinhartos replied confidently. "The gods *will* provide, of this I am sure." Reinhartos's fervent faith was a matter of common knowledge: he attended the temples regularly, and many were the religious festivals that he had organized and led. *Two centuries from now and they'll be saying he was half-deity*, Angela thought wryly. *It's always the way. Sometimes I think we are born liars, us Greeks; we cannot have just a strong and just man—he must always be an offspring of the gods. Certainly we value an exciting story more than we value an honest one.* She saw Salōmē give an affectionate eyeroll: clearly she did not share the depth of faith of Reinhartos—but then again, few did, Angela supposed.

A yawn came to her. *Time to sleep.* She got up, retrieving her bedroll from the chest inside the wagon, and made her way back to Fareeha. She unrolled her bedroll on a patch of somewhat-comfortable-looking grass. Fareeha turned, looking at her, backlit by the dying fire, and Angela found herself flushing red in a manner she could not quite blame on the wine. She turned her back to Fareeha and stripped off her clothes, keeping on her undergarments—the strophion and perizoma. Many Greeks sported bent backs or crooked spines, due to scoliosis or poor nutrition in childhood, but Angela's back was straight, elegant, pale, unscarred.

Unbeknownst to Angela, Fareeha allowed herself a few looks, then turned her head away, also staring into the middle distance. Angela slid into her bedroll: it wasn't thick, but it was warm, built of quality leather and lined with fur.

She looked up at the sky, mentally tracing the lines of the constellations her father had taught her all those years ago. *There are the Pleiades. Ursa Minor, Ursa Major. Lepus, the rabbit. Aquila, the eagle. Gemini the twins, Orion the hunter with his belt.* Exhaustion caught up with her, and her eyes grew heavy.

Before she knew it, she was asleep, unaware of Fareeha's gaze fixed upon her features.

Chapter End Notes

One hundred thousand thanks go to problematick, the world's most patient and responsive beta reader, and a better friend than I possibly deserve.

I started a Tumblr for these fics, so head on over to hundred-handed.tumblr.com if you want to send me an ask. Or something. I don't really know.

And thank you all so much for the kudos and unbelievably sweet comments. They make such a difference, and they inspire me to write more and more. I truly appreciate each and everyone one of you: learning that I made you happy makes me happy.

The Journey

Chapter Notes

Only a couple of vocabulary words you need to know this go-round:

skiadeion - a sort of parasol or umbrella. The ancient Greeks were savvy enough to make ones that could open and close.

tsikoudia - a Greek spirit distilled from grapes and grapevines. Roughly analogous to *grappa*, which you may have had.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Reinhartos had said that Fareeha would be *as her shadow*, Angela hadn't quite realized the extent to which that would be true. The tall Egyptian was *everywhere*: at her side as they bumped and trundled along the road from Athens to Corinth; sitting silently behind her during morning and evening repasts; even near her on the occasions when a river ran close enough to their campsite to allow them to bathe. She never looked at Angela's naked form, at least not that Angela could tell; she kept her back turned as Angela splashed the always-freezing river water over herself and scrubbed herself down with a faded yellow sponge from Kalymnos she had brought along.

She rarely caught Fareeha slipping off, ever: once, hurrying back from the river, while Angela was loading their belongings back into the wagon. And one time, when the wagon train was circled and its members gathered around a roaring fire, she spotted Fareeha trotting up behind her, her hair and skin still damp from whatever quick bath she had taken. The image of Fareeha's copper skin glistening in the firelight stayed with her for several days.

And one morning, before bathing, after Fareeha's back was turned, Angela spotted her walking away, and did not enter the water: instead she turned, hiding behind a tree, flitting from hiding spot to hiding spot, keeping her footsteps as light as possible as she followed Fareeha many paces behind. The Egyptian was walking quickly, looking for something, though Angela was clueless as to what: she strode along, pausing occasionally to survey her surroundings, then shook her head.

And then, a clearing in the woods, lit by the sun shining steadily through the leaves and through gaps in the treeline. She watched, breath held, as Fareeha unstrapped her ever-present sword and shield from her back and took them in her hands: sword in the right, shield mounted firmly on her left. And she began practicing: a few steps, delicate, like a boxer's, half-dancing on the forest floor. Then a series of swings of the sword, left-to-right first, then right-to-left, then vertical, north-south and south-north. She moved backwards and began to practice her movement, no longer dancing on the ground: she sped from side to side, strong legs propelling her, slight grunts escaping her throat as she strafed left and right.

Angela's eyes nearly popped out of her head when she started to incorporate rolls into her routine: she would dive, hit the ground, the muscle of her arms tensing as she pulled herself into a roll and pushed out of it, leaping to her feet lightning-quick. Hand-to-hand combat, now, first shadowboxing, jabs flying, then practicing her hooks, left, right, left, then fearsome uppercuts, hammerfists, elbow strikes. She selected a small, half-rotten tree from a nearby copse and began to strike it, her shins and fists making a hollow **pock** sound, then lunged forward and wrapped her arms around it, impacting it with her shoulder, hands assuming a myriad variety of positions. *She's*

practicing throws, Angela realized. *On a tree.*

Just then, as she shifted to get a better view, she felt a twig snap beneath her left foot, and froze, then dodged behind the tree from which she had been observing Fareeha. Had she been able to keep her eyes on Fareeha, she would've seen the taller woman whip around, eyes narrowed, searching the forest for the source of the noise. Thirty nailbiting seconds later, she heard the gentle *whoosh* of Fareeha's sword begin again, and here Angela turned tail and ran back to the riverbank, her heart pounding and cheeks flush, images of a graceful, willowy Egyptian whirling in her mind.

Fareeha and Angela discovered a rudimentary system of communication. A wave in the morning and a wide smile from Angela; a beckoning hand when she needed something heavy lifted; a soft tap on a bronzed forearm when offering the taller woman a few morsels from her stash of candied figs. And, in turn, Fareeha developed her own gestural vocabulary: an elegant arm held up to provide a steady support when alighting from the wagon, a hand on her shoulder and a threatening step forward towards a merchant who, several goblets' worth of wine in, found the temerity to make some crude sexual advances at Angela. (At the Egyptian's sudden approach and glowering countenance, the merchant turned tail and ran, and would continue to do so whenever he spotted Fareeha at Angela's side.)

What particularly vexed her was Fareeha's refusal to speak a word of Greek. A "hello, Angela", would have lit up her day, but she stayed quiet, no matter how many simple words Angela attempted to introduce to her. She would have thought her mute, were it not for the snatch of Egyptian conversation she had overheard between her and one of Reinhartos's hangers-on. *She understands more than she lets on*, ruminated Angela, *but she refuses all chances to speak my language. And as such, she is a closed book to me.*

A heavy rain came, and with it a cough that spread through the caravan. It settled heavily in the childrens' lungs, and Angela spent hours inside the wagons, dashing between them with *skiadeion* held tightly, gently pounding on the youths' backs and attempting to keep them warm with the few oil lamps they had on hand. It was then that they worked out a further vocabulary: two fingers pointed out for *go*, a hand held up for *stop*, one finger pointed down for *stay here*, a gesture towards a child's back for *please, take over here*. It wasn't much, not the Attic Greek in which Angela was comfortable, but it was theirs, and it worked.

And once, after a long day of traveling, as Angela struggled to keep her eyes open while taking notes by the fire's dying light—she always took notes, a habit picked up from her late mother, notes on the flora and fauna their caravan passed, on the towns and hamlets she could spot from the road, on the stories and chatter she had overheard from other members of the expedition—Fareeha came to her side, and laid a warm hand on her forearm, and gestured to the bedroll that she had laid out. Angela's heart beat loud in her ears, and for a moment the world disappeared: there was only Fareeha, and Fareeha's hand, and Fareeha's gentle but insistent smile. Her hand was strong, calloused but warm, and Angela felt a warmth there long after Fareeha had left.

Sometimes, late at night, when Fareeha thought Angela was asleep, she would sometimes sing, softly, like a nightingale; quiet, lilting notes, punctuated by the rasp of steel on steel as she sharpened the curve of her sword. And Angela always held her breath so as not to miss the slightest note.

The heat and cramped conditions of Reinhartos's wagon had gotten to Angela. She had shimmied out the back, followed by a frowning Fareeha, and had emerged, blinking in the harsh light, looking for something, anything else in which to make this leg of the venture. Dust blew into her eyes, forcing her her to squint, and when she had finished blinking it away, what should she see in

front of her but Junkrat's wagon, smelling, as always, suspiciously of brimstone, its blonde-haired driver's eyes wide and smile disarmingly wide at spotting her.

"Doctor! Doctor!" he yelled, patting the empty seat next to his. He pulled on the reins, halting his oxen briefly, to allow Angela, and the ever-watchful Fareeha, the chance to board his cart.

His bodyguard sprawled in the back, his massive bulk cushioned by a few sacks of grain. Around him was scattered a myriad array of, well, junk: pots, pans, empty waterskins, awls, shovels, a few singed palimpsests and scrolls, hoes, picks, adzes, goblets, rusted swords, a plethora of assorted gears, and several pieces of equipment that Angela could not identify—it was a mess, through-and-through, but neither passenger seemed to mind. Nothing was the obvious source of the inescapable sulfurous smell.

"*Doctor!*" cried Junkrat. "And her lovely"—here he batted his eyelashes, in a manner no doubt meant to be flirtatious but that came off as deeply unsettling—"bodyguard. And how are we today?"

"Well, Iakobos, and yourself?"

Junkrat's smile grew even wider. "Me? Wonderful! Wondrous. Magnificent."

He turned around towards the figure in the back of his wagon. "Oy, big'un! We have visitors. Wake up. Be polite." The massive man craned his neck up, observing the new arrivals, then, with a cavernous grunt and a wave of his hand, fell back to his original position. He was *gigantic*, Angela noted, nearly as tall as Reinhartos, but much, much wider. He was clad in mostly leather: a mask that covered the lower half of his face, some bands strapped across his massive girth, a codpiece around his crotch, with a short, ragged loincloth dangling from it. An enormous tattoo, depicting the surprisingly-cute face of a pig, was emblazoned on the most prominent point of his belly. Angela did her best neither to stare nor giggle.

"That's Makonnes. Makonnes Rotleigos. Though he doesn't respond to much other than Roadhog," explained Junkrat animatedly. "You and I, we're two peas in a pod, no? Two upright, moral citizens, traveling along, enjoying the fresh air and our freedom, and both of us with bodyguards who seem content with nary a word." He peered at Fareeha, narrowing his eyes ever-so-slightly. "What's her deal, eh? A looker, that's for sure. Not one for talking, though."

"I'm... I'm not quite sure," she stammered, taken aback and ever-so-slightly angered by the question. "She's from Egypt, Reinhartos says. Alexandria, I think. The daughter of somebody famous? I don't know," she replied, suddenly unaccountably fidgety. "We haven't really had a heart-to-heart yet. She speaks no Greek." She snuck a glance at Fareeha, whose face remained, as always, implacable.

"Plenty of time, eh? Plenty of time, Doctor. We're still two or three days' travel from Corinth, assuming the weather keeps up," he averred.

"So, have you ever been to Corinth?" asked Angela, attempting to sustain the flow of conversation.

"Oh, Corinth? Many a time. Nice place. Good people. Got m'self into a slight bit of trouble a year or so back; haven't returned since."

"What... what sort of trouble?" Angela regretted asking almost as soon as the words left her mouth.

A comically exaggerated shrug from Junkrat. "A misunderstanding, Doctor! A simple

misunderstanding. One I am sure I can explain away. Something about a missing shipment of *tsikoudia*. And an unfaithful wife. And perhaps an unhappy daughter. Or two."

Angela raised an elegant eyebrow, and Junkrat scowled. "Fine. Maybe four daughters. I had *nothing* to do with two of them, though. Regardless, nothing some well-chosen words won't sweep under the rug. And I always choose my words well, eh, Roadhog?" A grunt of dissent emanated from the back of the wagon, and Junkrat scowled. "Well, sod you then."

"And Iakobos... what on earth is that queer smell?" Junkrat's eyes went wide, his eyebrows high, then low, as his mouth formed the most innocent grin he could muster.

"S-Smell? I don't smell anything, Doctor."

"You are lying to me, Iakobos," Angela said with a gentle smile. She didn't *really* need to know what the strange man was transporting, but she found it somewhat amusing to catch the taller man in the lies in which he so often frolicked.

"Lies? Lies?! Doctor, I am no liar. At times I am, ahem, how to put it — *economical* with the truth. Yes. That."

The sun had slipped over the horizon. Dusk became twilight, twilight became gloaming, gloaming became night. The caravan had stopped later than usual, and grumbles ran between its members regarding the lateness of the food. Wind whipped and stymied the fire, causing Junkrat to stomp his foot and let out a resounding series of curses. Angela found herself drawn to Reinhartos's wagon, beside which he and Salōmē were, with a set of perhaps-too-rusty knives, chopping vegetables for the night's sustenance.

"May I help you?" she inquired, and Salōmē shot her a grateful look, handing Angela her knife and scuttering off without another word. Reinhartos turned around, ever-smiling.

"Doctor! Your assistance is most welcome. Please, chop these turnips." Angela set about doing so.

Angela broke the silence. "So, Reinhartos... you have no children?"

"What? No. Alas, alas. My dearly departed wife, Iris, she was barren. I was exhorted to divorce her, to find someone else who could bear me a child. But I could... I could not. I had only eyes for her. And together we were happy. For many years."

"I am sorry for your loss. I was there, at the funeral procession. Many wept. I hope you know that your wife was well-loved."

"Indeed she was! Always at me to do more for the common people, Angela. We built granaries and temples, staged festivals, rebuilt the eastern walls after Philip of Macedon—may he rot in his grave—tore them down during Chaironeia. And she cared not for the social aspects of *philanthropia* — her eyes lit up when she saw the people happy. And thus it made me happy. And before long, I found myself caring about their welfare too."

A thoughtful silence from Angela, punctuated by the sound of knives through turnips.

"But no. No children. Though I lacked not for them in my household. I have five nephews—Keteus among them, he is the oldest—and two nieces, and one grand-nephew. It is good to have children in a house, I think. Sweeter music than the laughter of young ones there is none. And of you, Doctor? Have you a husband? Family?"

"No. My father and mother lived in Massalia, and died when the Gauls laid siege to the city. And no husband for me... I... I care not for men."

"Aha. All is understood, young one. And worry not. It is of no import to me who catches your eye. To worry about whom others bed is the sign of a small mind, no?"

Another moment of silence. Angela felt equal measures of relief and embarrassment at her disclosure. The pots bubbled and the chatter of the caravan drifted softly into the night.

"But Massalia! Such a distance from Athens. How did you end up in my city?"

"The journey took me many years. A decade, in truth. I was barely more than a child when I left, but on the strength of Mother's reputation, I was commissioned as a ship's physician, traveling with a band of mercenaries on a trireme from Massalia to Napoli. And from there across land, over many months, with a trading caravan to Bari. I served as medic to a Roman legion for two years in exchange for passage to Patras. And from there, I was but an itinerant doctor, moving from village to village, sleeping where I could, trading my knowledge for food, working my way eastward, until one day I showed up at the Sacred Gate. And there I stayed."

"You have traveled far, doctor. Far indeed. But what compelled you to Athens? And why remain?"

"My father's stories. Always. He was Greek, from Kassōpē, a warrior, a captain in some army, who worked his way west until Massalia. He found there a pretty Helvetian doctor who caught his eye, and, getting on in age, resigned his commission. Growing up he told me such stories: 'a city, Angela, where people rule themselves, free of tyrants, free of kings. The noblest city in all the world.'" A laugh. "It wasn't that in practice, of course. When I arrived, and your city was still under the Macedonian yoke, I thought my heart would break."

"But the rule of the people returned. As it always seems to."

"Yes. The *dimokratia* seems like an insect, a beetle: persistent. Tenacious. Hard to squash. It may hide in a corner for a while, should it not be safe, but it always scurries back into the light."

"A well-chosen analogy, doctor. It is easy to subjugate a people who have never been given rights. But to take their freedoms away, after having had them for generations—this is not an action a citizenry is willing to forgive. Freedom can be removed, but the memory of freedom in Athens persists beyond any tyrant's attempt to snatch it away. Someday, perhaps it will be more complete. Women shall vote. Even slaves shall vote. Perhaps one day there will be no slaves. A city of free peoples, through-and-through. What say you to that, Doctor?"

"I... that sounds wonderful. Impractical, but wonderful."

"Impractical it may be. But, if no tyrant manages to squash our Athenian insect, perhaps it is inevitable."

And then, beneath the stars, a dream:

I am back in the armor. My angel is at my side.

A voice in my ear, Winston's. "Pharah. Mercy. Payload retrieved. Back to the ship, on the double."

I look back at the angel who bears my hair, my voice, my eyes. "Shall we?"

I engage my engines, and as I fly upwards I feel a warmth, like an arm around my waist. I glance back and there she is, following me; yellow light emanates from the staff in her hand, and she soars upwards, behind me, attached to me, a fierce smile on her face. And I meet her smile with one of my own, and gun my engines. I see a great metal ship begin to rise beneath us—how is it that such a thing, so massive, can fly, I wonder—and I hear the roar of its engines, echoing mine, as it approaches us.

The ship pulls up alongside us, and a panel within it opens, light spilling out from inside it. My vision is acute, and within I can see faces—my compatriots—and I feel joy, relief that they are all in one piece. I tilt my torso so as to fly nearly horizontally, and I enter the ship, my armor-clad feet clanking on the gangway, and my angel touches down beside me, light, effervescent.

We are strolling into the main deck of the ship when it hits. Horrendous clanging noises, tracing a mad path from stern to aft. It takes us all off guard; some fall to the floor as our ship rocks unsteadily in the sky. I turn around; there is fear on my angel's face. And at her expression, something cold and dark begins to fulminate within me. It is like rage, but cold, steely, controlled. Determination.

I turn, heading down the still-closing gangway. There is little time; the aperture to the outside is closing. I leap, and hear the scrape of my armor on the plank beneath me, and for a horrible moment I see myself crushed between implacable metals—but I make it, and suddenly I am falling, falling, *falling*, before I remember to activate my engines, and I tumble head-over-heels before the momentum of my engines can right me.

Projected before me I see the source of the danger. Two men, on a roof far beneath me, behind some fearsome artillery, a wide-mouthed, nasty thing, two barrels jutting out of it, spitting light and heat at the ship above me. Projected before me I see their red outlines, their weapon outlined in gold, phrases I do not understand — *PGZ-07, 35mm, twin cannon* — but that forge, temper, harden my resolve.

I know what to do. I have but to do it.

I cut my engines and begin to fall. *Have to save fuel if I am to make it back to the ship.* My speed increases, my armor begins to shake with my velocity, but I keep my facing, ready, ready, ready —

"JUSTICE RAINS FROM ABOVE!"

And suddenly I am all light and all heat. The weapon in my hand erupts, projectiles shoot from it wildly, and I feel apertures open on my suit, one in each shoulder, one above each thigh, and they spit fire, too, and it is all I can do to stay airborne. The force erupting from my body pushes me back, and I lean forward, my engines screaming wildly, as I maintain my position. I see the red outlines gawp in fear, then scatter, attempting to flee the roof; I see the yellow-outlined artillery crumple, buckle, then explode, its flames adding to the destruction I am wreaking upon the building. And then a rumble, a roar from the building itself, and I see it begin to collapse in on itself, all cracking concrete and rent metal, and the red outlines blink and melt away, and I know that my job is done, that I have saved my compatriots, my teammates — my friends. Yes, my friends.

And suddenly I realize that I am two thousand cubits up in the sky, and my fuel is dangerously low, and I turn from surveying my damage and give my engines all they have. I see the ship above me, propelled backwards now, towards me, lower, lower, and a beeping erupts in my left ear, and a cool mechanical voice — *low fuel, low fuel* — and now the low twitch of fear in my gut, *even Raptora cannot protect me from a fall of this height*, and I strain, whispering silent prayers to my engines, and I hear them splutter and stutter — *come on, you bastards, you fuckers, not now, not*

now — and the ship is closer now, closer, its gangway down, and I am closer, almost there, the silhouette of my angel backlit, illuminated—

—and my engines fail, so close, not a cubit away from the gangway, and I feel a horrible nausea as I begin to fall to my death—

—and then, strong, pale fingers around my arm, and I see *her*, dangling out the gangway, one arm holding a massive metal chain, the other holding me, and I can see the strain on her face, the agony nearly ripping her apart as she yells *pull, pull*, and we are winched up, into the light. She reaches the gangway and grabs my other arm and pulls with all her might, and I scrabble my way to safety, my bones aching with the effort.

And then I am standing in front of her, her cheeks flush, her body still heaving, and I grasp my helmet and toss it to the side, and she is in my arms, and I kiss her, and all my fear and adrenaline melts away, and I hear whooping and whistling from my compatriots, and I smile, and I kiss her harder, and she moves into me, and a warmth suffuses me from head to toe.

Chapter End Notes

So, 20k words. That is a thing that happened. Somehow.

As always, I need to thank problematck. She is more than a beta reader or editor: she is a collaborator, always there to help me out when I'm stuck on a phrase or straight-up out of ideas. None of this would have happened without her, and I owe her more than I can possibly say. You can check her out on [AO3](#) or [Tumblr](#); you will not regret it.

As always, drop me an ask on [Tumblr](#) if something's vexing you.

Confrontation

Chapter Notes

TW for graphic violence herein.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The morning fog clung close to the earth: it poured gently down the knolls and hills, it swirled through the branches of weeping willows, it scattered and diffused the first rays of dawn. The vegetation was lightly sprinkled with dew and the air suffused with the pleasant scent of damp earth. Birds—plovers, nuthatches, wrens, swallows, starlings, finches—awoken by the light, began their songs, filling the countryside with music. The breeze was light but cool. The caravan had stopped late at night again, having not found a suitable campsite until many hours after sunset, and its members had eaten a hurried supper and fallen asleep. But a suitable campsite it indeed was—trees surrounded them on three sides, but a good-sized clearing in the middle afforded them a place to stay away from prying eyes and out of the range of any winds.

Angela had been awake since before dawn: unpleasant dreams of blood and a Talon agent breathing his last had haunted her throughout the night. She had grown tired of waking up in a cold sweat, and with a sigh had extricated herself from her sleeping bag and begun the day's chores. She noticed Fareeha still sleeping, and with a slight smile decided to let her sleep. She always enjoyed being alone while observing the liminal space between night and day; to her it spoke of possibilities, of hope, of the chance that a good day might unfold, like a flower meeting the sun.

She grabbed a small shovel leaning against Junkrat's wagon (she heard two loud snores from inside the wagon, one low and ursine, the other nasal and high-pitched) and set out to a nearby clearing to dig the latrines. *Not the most glamorous work*, she thought, *but perhaps the most necessary. Even kings need latrines.* Behind her, she heard the giggling of two of the caravan's children. *They're up early*, she thought as they tore past, engaged in some sort of hybrid of tag and hide-and-seek. She watched as they scurried away into the forest, darting behind trees and lunging playfully at each other, hands outstretched.

How strange, to bring children into this world, she thought. *None of us ask to be thrust into this vale of tears. We ask not for our bodies, our brains, our suffering. And yet we remain here, our will aside, to live out our days. What if it is better to never have been?* She shook her head. *No. We get but one life, I feel, painful though it be. And, should there be something on the other side of death, how strange being alive will seem; what madness it is to be born into such a world, and what greater, joyous madness it is to enjoy the experience, to grasp what moments of happiness we can, like a bear snatching fish from a great river.*

"Don't run too far, now," she called after them. *Cute.* She found a clear enough spot, behind a thick clump of trees, and began digging. The soil gave easily, for which she was grateful. She dug three trenches, each positioned behind a tree, a few *dactyloi* deep and a few cubits long. She had been shivering occasionally beforehand, but the exercise warmed her up. Having finished, she planted the shovel in the ground and turned to face her work. Overhead, the leaves rustled in the breeze; they were changing, some still green, some brown and dessicated, but most all sorts of crimson. When the light shone just right, she could see the vasculature of the changing leaves, impossibly-delicate veins and arteries stripped bare by the beginnings of decay.

A child's scream came from within the woods, and Angela initially wrote it off as one of play, but then another, louder, with an edge of terror to it, and Angela's senses sharpened even as the bottom dropped out of her stomach. She grabbed the shovel and broke into a jog, then a full-on run, triangulating the source of the noise, her heart pounding in her ears. And her stomach fell even farther when she set eyes on what was confronting the child.

In a small clearing there stood three wolves, pacing slowly around a hyperventilating child. Their eyes gleamed a sinister amber in the half-light, and Angela could smell their musk. She gripped her shovel tightly in her hands then jumped forward with a yell, the implement raised high. The wolves blanched and jumped back, but did not run away: they were lean and hungry, ribs visible, Angela noted. Drool dripped from their jaws, their dark-grey coats ragged and matted with mud and dried blood. They were not as big as the wolves of which she had read in her books; juveniles, she supposed, though just as dangerous as full-grown adults. The child—a small, auburn-haired thing, by the name of Menodora, Angela remembered dimly—was quivering now, no longer screaming, just sobbing, crouched on the ground, clutching her knees in terror.

"Run," she hissed. "Back to the campsite." Menodora did not move. "Run. **Run**," Angela yelled. A moment's pause, and Angela thought she was lost, and prepared to see the child rent limb from limb—but then Menodora jerked upwards, suddenly a blur of motion, her legs pumping her small body with all their might. One of the wolves moved to follow her, lunging for the child, and Angela's spine went cold. She acted not out of thought, but out of instinct. With a yell, she leapt into the path of the wolf, swinging the shovel downward, the blow glancing off its back, her body colliding with the beast's side.

The impact was brutal; they rolled on the forest floor, Angela screaming with rage and terror, the wolf's jaws snapping and drooling. They struggled for purchase on each other's bodies; its nails raked across Angela's face, drawing blood. She kicked it in its side firmly, and it fell backwards for a moment, but before the blonde could roll away it was on her again, and her arm was in its mouth. Angela had time to think before it bit down with all its force: *Oh, no*.

Her flesh ripped and tore, and Angela screamed her throat ragged with the pain. It was white-hot, unbearable, agonizing; she felt teeth on bone, and the scrape made her stomach turn. It shook its head, arm firmly between its teeth, and the pain skyrocketed into an inexpressible realm. She thrashed out wildly with the shovel in her right hand; after two missed swings, she put all her strength into a third, and she felt it connect, the vibration singing through her arm. The wolf emitted a yelp, releasing her arm and jumping back, and the relief flooded through her. Then the pain hit again, and she thought she would pass out; it was worse than anything she had ever felt. Every nerve sung with it, blotches emerging in her vision and her ears ringing with sounds from nowhere; she convulsed, rolling involuntarily into a fetal position, moaning raggedly.

Angela's cheek was pressed against the twigs, leaves, and moss of the forest floor; it was strangely cool against her burning face. She felt the tiredness and the disturbing warmth associated with blood loss. The light of the sun through the fog became fuzzy, indistinct, halated, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the wolf that attacked her return to its feet as the other two stalked closer.

She heard them growling, low, throatily, viciously, and a thought flashed through her head: *Is this really how it ends?*

And then a yell from behind, a bloodcurdling one, and a flash of steel and copper. With a piercing whimper, the wolf that had attacked Angela fell to its belly, and Angela could see that its left hind leg was but a stump, the mangled remains of the limb rolling across the undergrowth. The smell of blood was stronger now, rusty, ferrous, visceral; it pooled on the forest floor, soaking the leaves, blooming out and darkening the earth.

Fareeha?

A bronze shield, emblazoned with a falcon, sped into her vision, and its edge impacted the top of the wolf's head with a wet, messy *crunch*. Angela looked up from her prone position and saw perhaps the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen in her life: Fareeha standing over her, sword and shield in hand, robe billowing in the soft breeze and illuminated by the half-light, rage blazing on her face. With a roar of battle, she swung her blade towards the downed wolf's neck, and Angela saw it twitch and shudder at the impact, and the light fade from its eyes.

Fareeha whirled around, face contorted in a snarl, to face the other wolves, who had pulled back to a safe distance but, attracted by the smell of blood, kept circling the women. Fareeha took a few skipping steps backwards, putting herself solidly between the wolves and Angela's prone form.

"Fa—Fareeha," Angela gasped. The Egyptian did not respond, but kept her eyes fixed ahead of her, darting around, establishing the positions of the animals that circled her. She was barefoot, Angela noticed, her feet padding carefully over the forest floor. The wolves continued to growl, snapping, ravenous with hunger. *She is without her armor*, Angela thought frantically. *Should one get its teeth in her, we will both die. Please, Gods, don't let anything happen to her. Please.*

A growl from one of the wolves, and it leaped towards Fareeha's left side, teeth bared and shining in the morning light. Fareeha saw it coming, and moved with unearthly speed, exploding back and to the side, parallel to the still-airborne wolf. Time seemed to slow, the noise of combat fading away as she saw Fareeha dodge with preternatural speed.

Then, with all her force, Fareeha *slammed* the face of her shield into the wolf's head. The sound of its jaw breaking rang throughout the clearing. It squealed deafeningly, squirming in pain as it fell to the soil, and Fareeha used her momentum to waltz around to face its stomach, spitting some Egyptian curse, as she swung her sword overhead in a windmill motion towards the wolf's unguarded belly. And a scream from the prone wolf, and blood sprayed from its soft parts, spattering Fareeha's noble face, and Angela smelled the stench of spilled guts, and she retched. Her arm still radiated pain with every heartbeat.

She moves like the wind, Angela thought, the agony resounding through her from head to toe. She fought to stay conscious. *If I am to die, I will make sure the last thing I see is her fighting. For me. There are worse final sights to witness.* Tears sprung to her eyes, and she retched again, but she kept her eyes open, struggling against the agony of her ragged arm, her vision blurred by her tears.

The third wolf cringed, yelping, and turned to flee, but Fareeha was too swift. Diving forward, in precisely the same motion Angela had seen her practice days before, she tucked and rolled, pushing with her shield hand to propel her, and, as she rose to one knee, slashed viciously, right to left, and the wolf fell to the forest floor, moaning piteously, its legs scrambling uselessly for purchase on the forest floor. Fareeha, it became clear, held no sympathy for the animal: rising to her feet, she walked calmly to its front, shifting her shield back on her arm to hold her weapon with two hands. With a grunt, she swung downwards at the wolf's neck, the curved side of her blade out, glinting viciously in the half-light, and Angela heard the moist rip of severed flesh and crack of severed vertebrae. She saw its head roll gently away from its still-twitching body, and felt her gorge rise again.

Fareeha wasted no time in victory: she darted to Angela's side, worry and dread crossing her features. She felt fingers at her throat, checking her pulse, then heard a *rip*, and felt cloth wrap around her wound—fuck, it hurt, it *hurt*, her nerves burned with the pain of it, and she thrashed in agony, yet Fareeha pulled the strip of cloth tighter, blood blossoming over its pale-white surface.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. Fuck. By the gods, it hurts, Fareeha. It hurts so much. Please," she gasped, thrashing again, trying to remove her arm from the Egyptian's grasp, but her strength was as

nothing against the taller woman's grip. Fareeha shook her head and held the makeshift bandage tighter. She squeezed one eye open and saw the sleeve of Fareeha's robe torn off, affording a view of copper-colored biceps splattered with wolf blood. Another *rip* and she felt more pressure on her arm, and screamed anew.

Fareeha whispered something to Angela that she did not understand, and quickly slid her arms underneath Angela's body, lifting her up as if she weighed nothing. Her mangled arm hung down, still dripping blood onto the forest floor, though slightly staunch by the already-soaked bandage. Angela lay in Fareeha's strong arms, looking up at the Egyptian's grim, steely expression, her arm sparking white-hot pain up her shoulder with every one of Fareeha's quick steps. Her head lolled over Fareeha's arm, affording her a dreamlike, upside-down view of the world: the forest speeding around her, punctuated by her moans and what was presumably Egyptian profanity from Fareeha; the increasing sound as they neared the campsite; screams and gasps from the members of the caravan; a father clutching and screaming at the still-sobbing Menodora; Salōmē yelping and holding a hand to her mouth at the sight of Angela's pale face and Fareeha's blood-soaked visage; Reinhartos running towards them, his face lined with shock and anger.

Fareeha wordlessly handed Angela into Reinhartos's arms; she somehow maintained consciousness, though darkness clawed at the edge of her vision. The pain had drained away, replaced by numbness; *I'm going into shock*, she thought, suddenly thankful for small mercies. She heard the drip of her own blood on the ground.

Reinhartos looked down, his expression grave and drawn. "She has lost much blood," he rumbled. "We must ride to Corinth. I will go. Nikostratos's wagon is drawn by two horses. I shall take one, you the other. It is two hours' distance."

"Sir, is it wise for you to leave our—" asked a member of his retinue tentatively.

"*Silence*," he roared, turning on his heel at the man, who cringed so hard he nearly fell over. "I shall do what she did for me. I shall save her life. I owe her this. I know of a doctor in Corinth; he will help. Fareeha! Horses," he barked, pointing in their direction. Fareeha got the message, running towards a wagon and rapidly untying the rope that anchored them to the wagon. "Salōmē, bandages from our wagon." She heard the older woman's footsteps scurry off.

The blackness took over Angela's vision; she heard the clip-clop of horses' hooves and a grateful grunt from Reinhartos. The pain rang again through her as she felt more bandages wrap around her agonized arm, but she no longer had the strength or the breath to moan. As she was loaded onto the back of the horse, up against Reinhartos's massive bulk, her consciousness finally falling away, she thought she heard some words from an strange yet familiar voice, soft, accented, in the Greek she knew:

"Hold on."

Chapter End Notes

Things are going to be okay for Angela. I promise.

As always, thank you to problematck, who keeps me stock with great ideas and calls me out on the bad ones.

Convalescence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Her arm hurt. That was, as she emerged slowly from blessed unconsciousness, the only thing Angela could perceive. Her ears rang with it, her jaw clenched, her eyes rolled back in her head: it was omnipresent, inescapable, manifesting in leaping white and red phosphenes behind her eyelids. Her wound was bound tightly, she could tell, as each heartbeat caused it to rub against some much-too-rough material, producing in turn further suffering. Every bone in her body ached, but those in her arm most of all: it was as though someone had wedged a burning coal between her ulna and radius. Her face hurt, too: tentatively moving her lips and tongue, she could feel the cling and rip of fresh scabs, and she winced, which further exacerbated the agony in her arm. Tears leapt to her eyes, and she let them fall, breathing raggedly and crying silently, afraid to let her chest heave with the sobs for fear of more pain. The suffering associated with recovering in Reinhartos's home from her head wounds was nothing compared to this, in the way a puddle is nothing compared to the Mediterranean.

It was dark. It took her a few minutes to realize that this was because her eyes were closed. She opened them slowly, afraid of the light, but when her vision came back into focus she realized it was late, very late. She could not see the particulars of the room she was in; feeble moonlight streamed in through two windows. The first illuminated her bed: looking down carefully, so as not to aggravate her injuries, she espied her left arm, wrapped in several layers of bandages, her fingers swollen and red, vivid against the pale white-blue of the moonlit sheets.

Carefully, oh-so-carefully, she moved the index finger of her left arm, and pain immediately flashed through her so viciously that she wheezed and jerked her head backwards, impacting the none-too-soft pillow painfully. *At least it moved*, she thought when the pain cleared. *No amputation. No paralysis either, if the gods are good.* She flexed the muscles of her left leg, right leg, right arm: no deep pain, though she felt the host of bruises that constellated her flesh.

She raised her vision in front of her, towards the second window, and her breath caught in her throat.

There was Fareeha, asleep, sitting backwards in a finely-wrought wooden chair, resting her head on her arms and her arms on its back. She looked awful, worse than Angela had ever seen her: the feeble light accented the bags under her eyes and the lines of exhaustion across her face. Her skin was pale, paler than usual, a light tan rather than its usual burnt umber; Angela could not discern whether it was the moonlight or something else that rendered her so.

"Fareeha," Angela said, or tried to say—it came out as a squeaked croak, *'reeha* — and Fareeha's head snapped up instantly. Dark eyes met Angela's, and within a second she was at the right side of Angela's bed, worry and pain contorting her noble features. She reached for Angela's pale hand, and Angela saw that she was trembling. *She shouldn't do that*, she found herself thinking.

Angela's good hand met Fareeha's, and both women held their breath for a moment. Then Fareeha's strong, calloused fingers laced through Angela's delicate ones, and Fareeha squeezed lightly, and Angela squeezed back, and relief coursed over Fareeha's face.

"You saved me," Angela managed to mumble through the pain. The effort of speaking provoked new fire in her arm, but she continued. "Saved me. Thought I was dead." She swallowed thickly, wincing with the effort. "You were... so beautiful. Like a dancer."

Angela tugged her hand free of Fareeha's, and the taller woman looked down in shock, then jumped as Angela's hand rose and cupped her face.

"Shouldn't... shouldn't cry," Angela said, with a small, painful smile. She wiped something off of Fareeha's face, and Fareeha looked confused, and raised a finger to her own cheek, pulling it away and staring at the glistening sheen a tear had left on her finger. She looked back at Angela, and the tears came in earnest now, flowing down her face as she stared at Angela, gratitude and relief and reverence in her dark eyes.

And it was then that Fareeha Amari lowered her head to Angela's side and, for the first time in years, wept.

Reinhartos visited her the next day, accompanied by a short, wizened doctor with a piratical but kind smile. She was on the second floor of his home, the doctor informed her; she would have bled out had she arrived any later. He disinfected the wound and changed the bandages; Angela gasped out in pain all the while, and Fareeha turned away, shuddering, hiding the eyes that brimmed again with tears. He gave her mead, thick and sour from the opium stirred into it. Angela drank it gratefully; it afforded some measure of relief from the pain, though it dulled her thinking. She saw, as though underwater, Fareeha move around the room, leaving strange traces in her vision, as she knelt at Angela's side, her head bowed in prayer, mouthing words that Angela could not discern or understand. Then Fareeha took her hand. Angela slipping back into unconsciousness, felt rough, weatherbeaten lips pressed to its back.

The nightmares returned, fueled by the opium. She found herself on a road in a dark forest, running, running, though her legs moved slower the more effort she put in, as though in a swamp or mire. Wolves emerged from behind every tree, silently lining the sides of the road, forming a mute, lupine gauntlet. Menodora's cries echoed overhead, earsplitting, so loud it felt like her head would burst with the noise, and she looked up to find the source of the clamor, but the sky was empty and blood-red, and when she returned her gaze to the road, every wolf had Fareeha's face, and they lunged for her throat in unison, and she awoke, spluttering and yelling with the pain. But Fareeha was there, at her side, whispering words she did not understand, rubbing her shoulder as Angela wept in fear and agony.

More and more of the caravan came to visit her. Salōmē came and fussed over her, changing her bedsheets and emptying her chamber pot. Keteus, stuttering and star-struck, came, professing his admiration—perhaps overmuch, as eventually Angela had to feign unconsciousness to stem the flow of his words. Little Menodora came, with her father, bearing some small clay gifts the child had made to honor the doctor. Her father had difficulty meeting her eyes, but mumbled his thanks. She smiled at them both. And Junkrat and Roadhog showed up, too, over the outraged cries of the doctor, one night; Junkrat burst in the door, all manic-smiles and jabbered greetings, while Roadhog followed, silently, with some difficulty squeezing his bulk through the too-small-for-him entrance. Angela found herself unaccountably happy to see the pair of them, and they stayed nearly the whole night, Junkrat regaling her with the tale of how he avoided the unhappy wives and daughters, then telling her every dirty joke he knew. Angela had laughed her whole body sore.

It took several weeks, but Angela's wounds healed, slowly but surely. Her arm gained more and more function by the day; she gave thanks to all the gods that it was not her right one that had been mauled, as she would never have been able to perform any type of surgery again. She had lost feeling in much of the skin on her arm, but all her fingers still worked, though her pinky and ring fingers could no longer curl all the way down to her palm. Scabs, still painful, began to fall off, revealing raw, mottled scars beneath. The pain still dogged her, sometimes as just an ache, and sometimes, on rainy days, as small stabs up and down her forearm. She gritted her teeth and did

her best to grow accustomed to it: she knew, from her time spent treating old soldiers, that the pain would likely never vanish entirely.

Reinhartos assured her he would not leave Corinth without her. "Some of the caravan have departed. They have obtained what they came here for, I suppose. And I have kept the rest in food and wine. I asked of the remainder if any wished to leave without you; none, having seen to your heroics, deigned to do so. Is that not something?" He smiled at her grandfatherly, and she smiled back. Sometimes, late at night, he would bring Angela a dented tin mug of ale, ignoring her doctor's protests, and Angela, grateful for the alcohol and the break in the monotony, would sit and listen to his stories of strange people and far-off lands. She took pleasure in his gruff baritone, and occasionally snuck glances at Fareeha, who remained in the corner, always watching, catlike, unmoving.

She grew more confident on her feet; during her first few attempts at leaving her bed, she had stumbled, her legs unsteady with disuse, but Fareeha was always there, ready to catch her quick-as-a-wink. (Once, compelled with the urge to tease her protector, Angela had feigned a fall, bringing her hand to her brow as she fell. Fareeha had given her a very strange look afterwards.) Fareeha had moved her trunk of belongings into Angela's room, and when the doctor finally granted her leave to venture outside she took great pleasure in the feel of her own clothes. The doctor had given her strict orders to leave her arm in a sling, and she changed her own bandages nightly, by now only wincing at the sensation.

If Angela thought that Fareeha had been ever-present before the wolf attack, she was subsequently proved wrong: Fareeha outright refused to leave her side now, only letting her out of sight when using the privy. She slept on a stuffed chair in Angela's room as she recuperated, and had developed the trick of waking up before and going to sleep after her, night after night. Angela would have been irritated, but the nightmares still came, and it was not unpleasant to have someone's hand to hold while chasing images of blood and suffering out of her mind. And sometimes, when she caught the Egyptian's eye, she felt a warm stirring in her chest, and blushed, and looked down at the floor.

A storm came, one night, and the thunder and lightning overhead shook Corinth's homes and businesses. Angela sat somberly in her bed, resting against her pillows, as Fareeha lay in her chair, silently regarding the rain that poured outside.

Angela broke the silence. "I don't know how much you can understand me. Part of me feels that it's much more than 'none'. You seem to have many secrets. But you do not mind when I talk. So shall I tell you of my youth?"

Fareeha turned to meet Angela's gaze, her expression unchanging. But something in her eyes seemed to say *go on, go on*.

"I was born in Massalia," Angela reminisced. "Mother was a surgeon, the city's best. Father was a war hero. He never spoke of his battles. But sometimes I would hear him screaming in the night. I think he was happy to have a daughter, as he knew I would never be conscripted. I was their only child, and they both doted on me. They exchanged favors for favors and obtained me private tutelage. There was much love in my home. And Massalia was intoxicating, endlessly fresh: I would walk down a single thoroughfare and hear Latin, Greek, Gaulish, Egyptian, and I would sit by the docks and watch the ships come in, and their thousands of passengers go by."

"And then one day..." Angela sighed, and looked at the bedsheets through the gap her legs made. "...I had spent some months apprenticing under a surgeon in Phocaea. I was still a child. Sixteen summers old. I was traveling home with a group of pilgrims. And we rounded the corner, and I saw the city in flames. I jumped off the donkey I was riding and I ran half a league to the city

gates." She gave a small, sad smile. "The Gauls, the Allobroges, had come from the north, their raiding party a few thousand strong. They had breached the north wall, near where my parents lived."

Her voice grew thick with emotion. "I ran through the streets. I was so scared. Fire was everywhere. Their warriors were running from house to house, looting what they could. They could have sliced me to ribbons, but no one took notice of a skinny girl who cried as she ran."

A long pause. Fareeha had moved closer, now sitting at Angela's side, gaze fixed on the blonde.

Angela spoke slower now, the edge of a sob encroaching on her voice. "Their house was burned to the ground. Father's body was over Mother's. He protected her to the last. I thought the smoke or flames had gotten them, but then I spotted two dead soldiers around him, their brains bashed in with a frying pan." A small, pained smile. "He went down swinging. And protecting my mother. A nobler death there could not be. But the fire had burnt them, burnt them so thoroughly I could barely look."

"I spent the night salvaging what I could from the house. I dragged the barbarians' corpses onto a fire, and I buried my parents in the patch of green we had out back. It took me all night to dig the graves. I didn't have money for a proper headstone, even if I could have found one, so I lugged a rock that had fallen from the walls, and I carved their initials into it. And I left it there, as the sun rose, and I never looked back."

She took a deep breath, and shook her head. "I went down to the docks that day. I found a captain that had once dined at our house, and I begged and pled him to take me on as ship's doctor. He probably would not have relented had Mother and Father not been dead. I was greener than green. Had never performed surgery by myself, never seen syphilis, never treated a rotting limb. And two weeks later, there I was, performing my first amputation." She shivered at the thought, her skin crawling. "But I learned fast. And the mercenaries grew to like me. One night one of them got drunk and tried to force himself on me. And when one heard me telling the captain, the rest of them beat the offender black and blue."

Fareeha's hand was in hers, warm and reassuring. Angela squeezed it and kept speaking.

"When we arrived in Napoli, I thought it was the most magnificent city in the world. I apprenticed under another doctor. I took a lover. I never planned to go anywhere else." Angela drifted off, observing the rain spattering the thick, translucent windows.

"But she left me. Perhaps I loved her too much, too strongly. I had thought to make a life with her. And after she left, everything was suffused with her memory: I could not walk down the street without thinking *this is where she took my arm on that rainy day, this is the taverna where she drank too much wine and I carried her home, this is the corner where the old women would smile at us when we kissed*. And I couldn't look at my bed without thinking of the first time I told her I loved her, or the first time we made love. I could barely stand to be in my home. All my surroundings, my possessions... when she left, they sprouted thorns."

"So I ran, again. I remembered the stories that Father would tell me of Athens. 'A great city, Angel', he would say. 'Better than all others. Athenians are free. They rule themselves.' And I believed him."

Angela gave a dreamy sigh. "So I set out eastward. I scrounged together what little coin I had and found a trading caravan, much like ours is supposed to resemble. Spent my last drachma on food and supplies, convinced an old woman to give me space in her wagon, and set forth to Bari, the port city. I joined up with a Roman legion whose previous physician had dropped dead of dysentery, and I spent every drachma of my sign-on bonus getting drunk. I had run so far: what

was the extra distance to the bottom of a bottle?"

"The Romans didn't trust me, the blonde Greek who spoke such poor Latin. And I did not trust them, either. A brutish people, I think. They speak of a Republic, but their citizens hold no power: an electorate of old, foggy-eyed men make the decisions that mete out life and death in their slums. And their hunger for conquest knows no bounds." A crack of thunder punctuated her sentence dramatically.

"I spent too long with them. Years. I grew to hate them, hate stitching young bodies back together to allow them to go and get injured again—or killed, as was more common. By the end of my tour of duty, I grew to hate war, to hate warriors—I could not even think of my father without a rush of anger. Every man who signs on to an army grows its strength, and no army lessens in size, unless beneath the heel of another one." A scowl crossed her face. "Armies grow and grow, and all a just ruler or leader can do is hope to contain them. And even if they do, the demagogues, so often in the pocket of some general, emerge from the woodwork to convince the people they are being made less safe. I despise it."

A pause. The anger vanished from Angela's face as she beheld Fareeha's visage, soft and ethereal in the dim illumination cast by the oil lamp near her bed.

"But I had saved my coins well, and soon I had the means to flee. I hopped the first ship I could to Patras. And when I arrived there, what relief! To be truly surrounded by those spoke my Greek, for the first time in my life. It was like coming up for air when all I had known was to be underwater."

"Yet still I found myself drawn eastward, to Athens. So I hired a bodyguard, and he and I traveled east. From slum to village to hamlet. They had need of me, and even if I could not help, they had need of my presence. I learned much in the journey: how to gather my own herbs, how to sleep under the stars, how to approach and speak to those who would otherwise distrust me." She gave a winning smile. "It served me well."

"And then... Athens. And my assistant Thaïs. And the expulsion of Demetrius, and the restoration of the *dimokratia*."

A long pause.

"And then, the poisoning of the Grey Lion." Angela's eyes dropped to her arm, remembering the difference between the few blows to the head she had suffered then and the still-new agony of her savaged arm. She swallowed, working up the courage to meet Fareeha's gaze again. "And then... you."

Fareeha's eyes sparkled in the half-light.

A wry smile. "And then me, on a journey to who-knows-where, guarded by the bravest woman in the world." She smiled again, and yawned. Fareeha rose to her feet, moved the pillows into Angela's preferred arrangement, and raised the bedclothes so that Angela could burrow beneath them. The blonde sighed contentedly.

"Thank you, Fareeha. I like... I like that you are with me." With a further nuzzle into the pillows, she closed her eyes.

Fareeha waited some minutes until Angela's breaths became slow and regular. She knelt by her bedside, and saw a stray strand of golden hair fall across the doctor's forehead, and halfway moved her hand to tuck it behind her ear—and then pulled her hand back, cheeks burning, heart pounding.

A few days passed, days of waiting beneath blue Corinthian skies. And one evening, Angela, feeling well despite her arm still in its sling, followed Fareeha and Reinhartos to a taverna, an outwardly dingy building with a shingle bearing the name "ARCHAEION". The building's outside belied its inside, however: when they opened the door, they were greeted with warm air, the pleasant smell of cooking food, and the sounds of people making merry. They sat in at a low-slung table near the back of the taverna, close enough to the hearth's fire to have some illumination but sufficiently hidden enough not to draw any prying eyes.

"The first round is on me, children," intoned Reinhartos, proceeding grandly to the barkeep, who stood behind several barrels and an assortment of strange-colored liquids in glass bottles. Angela lowered herself gingerly into a sitting position. Fareeha sat beside her, wasting no space; Angela felt the warmth of the Egyptian's thigh against hers, and smiled. Keteus sat across from them, doing his best to make eyes at Angela; she did the merciful thing and ignored him.

The door of the taverna opened, and a tall, lean figure strode in. A shock of white hair capped an aged, handsome face. His eyes were green, his skin fair yet weathered, and he was clad in expensive, well-wrought mail armor and pauldrons. The crested, filigreed helmet he carried beneath his arm marked him as a member of the Roman army, and a high-ranking one at that.

Reinhartos turned around from his position at the bar, and his face became carefully neutral. He placed his mug of mead down, and stood up quietly. The strange man halted at the sight of the Greek giant; something like shock ran over his face, though it was quickly repressed. A hush fell over the taverna, all eyes glued to the men who stood, silent, and looked at each other.

Reinhartos broke the silence. "Iohannes."

"Reinhartos." The lean man's voice was worn, raspy, but behind it there was a hidden brightness. He spoke good Greek, but with a clipped, Latinate accent.

A pause. Not one person in the building dared to breathe.

"I remember your actions on Zakynthos," Reinhartos rumbled, not breaking eye contact with the shorter man.

"I was following orders." The man spoke flatly, yet Angela could perceive a steel behind his words.

"Yes... your precious orders. You always believed in their righteousness, Iohannes." Reinhartos's expression was unchanged, but his stare at the newcomer could have melted iron.

"Yes. I did. And I still do."

A pause.

"Well, shall we give up these pretensions?" asked Reinhartos in his half-growled rumble.

"If we must," replied the Roman man—Iohannes, Angela supposed.

Both men tensed. And suddenly they flew at each other—Angela yelped in dismay, Keteus dove underneath the table, and Fareeha jumped to her feet, ready to throw herself into the melee—and then they noticed that no fighting had broken out. The men were... in each other's arms, pounding on each other's backs, both grinning widely.

"I *missed* you, old comrade," Reinhartos roared. "How many years has it been? Ten? Twelve?"

"At least, at least," exclaimed Iohannes, slightly strained from Reinhartos's crushing hug. "Let me go, you thrice-damned Titan, you, unless you wish to crush the breath from my body in front of all these people."

"**BARKEEP!**" bellowed Reinhartos. "The bravest warrior I ever knew has returned to my side. Iohannes Morrinicus, captain of the 76th Legion. Tonight, we *drink!* All of us!" And all in the building released the breaths they had been holding, and smiles broke out as Reinhartos tossed a bag full of drachmae on the bar, directing the harrowed-looking bartender to dispense beer to everyone in the building who wanted some.

"Iohan and I fought side-by-side against Talon, all those years ago," Reinhartos later exclaimed over his seventh or eighth mug of ale. "His Republic did not believe the tales of black-armored mercenaries preying on the merchant ships, did they?"

The white-haired man shook his head with a smile. "They did when the raids stopped. And when I returned a cohort of prisoners. And the leaders' heads. The ones this monster here had not rendered into a fine pulp, that is."

"Ah, were that I were able to swing Fusca like I did in the days of my youth," Reinhartos reminisced, a fond look in his eye as he pounded his mug on the table so forcefully Angela feared both would break.

"I saw him slay three men in a single swing," Iohannes averred, looking at Angela square in the face. "He swept aside fully-grown soldiers like a child tosses around dolls. Whole cohorts of what seemed like brave soldiers would break ranks and run when the Lion charged at them."

"Iohan exaggerates," Reinhartos rumbled. Then a grin slid over his face, and a twinkle formed in his good eye "But... perhaps not by much. And I think my record was four men. Though the fourth may have not died immediately." Angela gawped at Reinhartos, and he chuckled heartily in response. "But you should have seen *this* man in battle! No man on earth wields the *gladius* with greater swiftness or cunning. After each battle at his side I praised Ares that I did not number among his enemy. He would have me stuck, like a suckling pig."

Iohannes scoffed. "You flatter me, old friend." His expression changed to one of curiosity. "But what calamity could have expelled Reinhartos Uiliam from his beloved Athens? Do not say the city lies in ruins!"

Reinhartos turned his massive head from side-to-side, eyes darting around, looking around for unwanted listeners. Seeing none, he lowered his voice to a whisper, deafening despite his efforts. "Talon struck at me, Iohan. *Atropa* in my food, and, when this doctor"—he nodded in Angela's direction—"saved me, an assassin at my bedside, in that armor you no doubt remember."

Iohannes's eyes went wide and his mien darkened. "You... are sure?" he asked carefully. "Extraordinary that they would return, and that they would act out on their old grudges."

Reinhartos nodded gravely. "He bore the silver claw around his neck." He took a long drink from his mug. "You must be careful, Iohan. Should they learn where you are, they will try to snuff you out, as they tried to do to me. Sleep with your dagger under your pillow."

"I never stopped doing so, old friend," Iohannes replied, gentle amusement cutting across his worried countenance.

They drank through the night. Iohannes showed no reaction to the many drinks he had quaffed, but Reinhartos eventually lapsed into a stupor, his massive head resting on his even more massive chest. It took all of Fareeha and Iohannes's combined strength to drag him back to his quarters.

Two days later:

"Angela! Come and meet our new compatriots!"

Reinhartos's grin was wide in the morning sun as he beckoned the doctor over to the motley crew assembled in Corinth's main square. Keteus was at his side, wrestling, as always, with various bills of sale and cargo manifests.

Before Reinhartos there stood a strange man, one of dark skin, a quiet voice, a bald head, kind eyes. He introduced himself, in fluent but accented Greek, as Tekhartha Zenyatta. "From the East, Indoi—a mathematician! Have you ever met one before?" boomed Reinhartos. Beneath his arm was a slate and some sheaves of paper, on which were scribbled strange symbols and theorems and equations; Angela's head hurt even trying to read them. Behind him always stood his bodyguard, a taciturn, handsome young man with thick, jagged, black hair, bearing a long, straight sword on his back, not unlike Fareeha did.

Of his bodyguard Zenyatta said little, only that his name was Genji, that came from a far-off land, and journeyed with Zenyatta to see the world. When they spoke, they did so in a language that Angela could not recognize, much less understand. Zenyatta informed Angela that the two men had recently concluded a meeting with Euclid of Alexandria, of whom she had heard rumors: the man before whom all mathematics bowed. She liked Zenyatta, Angela decided; from him there seemed to radiate a calmness, a sense of well-being that put Angela at ease.

Angela heard a piercing shriek in her ear. "*Doctor!*" She turned and saw only a glimpse of singed blonde hair before Junkrat enveloped her in a sinewy hug, only letting go when Angela, her bad arm squashed, let out a cry of pain. Junkrat, for all his mischievous merits, put no one at ease, Angela thought.

"It is good to see you too, Iakobos," she said, wincing and laughing simultaneously. Roadhog, with a grunt of greeting, waved at Angela, and she waved back. (Reinhartos, turning around to lecture Keteus on some fine point of accountancy, blanched at the sight of Roadhog's massive bulk: though the masked man was a few dactyloi shorter than him, he was clearly unused to seeing anyone who approached his size.)

"I used our time here to send an emissary south, to Lacedaemon," Reinhartos explained. "They know that we will be coming. Which is good, as the Spartans take a dim view of those who show up unannounced."

"Is your friend—the Roman one—not coming with us?" asked Angela tactfully.

Reinhartos's face fell. "No. I implored him to accompany us. But he and his men have their duty to his republic, and he will not abdicate it. Would that he were still at my side... but no matter. We ride to Sparta, with or without the 76th Legion."

"ALL RIGHT, GOOD PEOPLE, TIME TO MOVE OUT," Reinhartos bellowed, swinging himself into his wagon. Fareeha moved to help Angela into it, but Angela shook her head.

"You know... I'd rather walk, I think. I've been cooped up for so long. I'd like to get some exercise." She pantomimed a walking motion with her fingers, though something inside her told her the gesture was entirely unnecessary.

Fareeha moved to her side, slipped her hand around Angela's, and the doctor flushed crimson, peeking at the taller woman's face. But she did not pull her hand away. And they exited, hand-in-hand, the gates of Corinth, following the caravan, eyes set on the horizon, south, towards Sparta.

Chapter End Notes

More characters! Old friends! More tags!

You know the deal by now: [problematick](#) is the best collaborator I could possibly have.

I am so glad to be done with this chapter. It is long as hell. The next one will be a lot of fun.

If you have questions, or just desire to inflate my ego, [send me an ask](#).

Interruption

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The caravan made its slow but steady progress onward. They were two leagues out of Corinth, and the sun hung low in the sky, the birds tentatively beginning their nightcalls. Angela had spent the day on the move; her recent inactivity had rendered her a little slow on her feet, but she was glad for the exercise, and her past travels had provided her with a good measure of stamina. She had traveled alongside Zenyatta and Genji, hoping to get to know the mathematician better and perhaps learn a few tidbits about his bodyguard. *Taciturn, foreign bodyguards seem to be a feature of this expedition*, she had thought with a smile. Zenyatta had been pleasant company; he had regaled her with stories of his hometown Massaga and had done his best to give her a high-level overview of his studies—prime numbers and their infinitude, the arcs described by thrown projectiles, how to reconcile two equations with the same unknown quantity contained therein. Angela understood very little of it, but she always enjoyed hearing others speak about their passions. Zenyatta and his bodyguard had eventually taken their leave, and Angela had slowed her pace a bit, arriving at Salōmē's side, settling into a comfortable silence. Fareeha walked a few paces ahead, scanning the horizon; Angela could not determine whether she did so in appreciation for the considerably beautiful view or whether this was a further aspect of her constant vigilance.

Angela let her eyes wander over Fareeha's form: raven-black hair, muscled arms, sword and shield on her back. The straps of her leather armor lay banded above her faint-yellow robe; the fabric was damp where it contacted her body, and in those patches she could see hints of the copper-colored skin beneath. The day was humid, perhaps unseasonably so; droplets of sweat left liquid, meandering paths down her burnished thighs, pale patterns tinted gold by the late-afternoon sun. Her strength was languid, disengaged but undisguisable: her strides had the strength of a panther, Angela thought. *A panther who hunts wolves*. She remembered the way Fareeha had leapt out of the path of the charging wolf, as Angela bled on the ground, how her feet had left the forest floor, how in that moment, before she had shed all that blood, it seemed she had held all the world's light, all the world's beauty.

A small sigh escaped her. And to her right she heard Salōmē giggle.

"Did... did you say something?" she asked, perhaps a trifle distractedly.

"Miss Angela, you are making eyes at your bodyguard," Salōmē said quietly, with a small smile.

Angela stopped in her tracks, cheeks burning, mouth open in outrage. "I am doing *no such*"—and here she realized she was speaking much too loudly, and lowered her voice—"thing!" she hissed. She shot a look forward, at Fareeha's figure a few paces ahead, at copper thighs and form-clinging cloth, and her cheeks flushed even further.

"If you say so, miss." Salōmē's eyes twinkled, and she suppressed another giggle.

"Why would—I mean—it's... it's not like that, Salōmē," Angela said, lamely. Her head spun.

Salōmē looked to her right, at Roadhog, who trundled along silently next to Junkrat's wagon. "Do you not agree with me, Makonnes?" He turned his head, staring Angela up and down, then looked at Fareeha. He returned his gaze to Salome and nodded, with a hearty grunt of agreement. Angela stamped her foot in frustration.

Salōmē smiled serenely. "I take it you have not kissed her yet, then. I had thought you would have

done so a week past. Perhaps two."

Angela spluttered wordlessly for half a minute, gesticulating at the still-smirking Salōmē while she tried to formulate a series of sentences that would conclusively prove that Salōmē had absolutely the wrong idea. Much to her dismay, not a coherent word came. She had often sat and listened to the lovesick youths of Alikokos as they described the fair hair and flawless skin of whomever they happened to be enamored with this week. She had rolled her eyes then; now, she found herself apologizing to the god of love. *Aphrodite Dôritis, I will leave ten thousand roses at your altar if you will please, please cure me of this affliction.*

And so it was, over the next few days, that Angela Zeigla became, simply, a mess. No longer could she meet the eyes of her Egyptian shadow, not without a sudden numbing of the brain, a paralysis of the limbs, a tingling of the phalanges. She could hardly hand Fareeha a bowl during mealtime without her hands shaking, and the merest dark-eyed glance was enough to send shivers shooting up and down her spine. She prayed that Fareeha would not notice her crush—yes, she could no longer deny it, a crush was well and truly what she had. *Perhaps she will write off my stuttering and trembling as trauma. Or perhaps sheer stupidity. Either would be preferable to the truth*, she lamented.

She mused on the word *intoxication*, on the *toxin* lying at its root: it was indeed, she thought, as if she had been poisoned, down to the physiological effects. Something was in her system indeed: something foreign.

Angela, Fareeha, and Salōmē had been assigned to dinner duty one night; the three women chopped vegetables as Reinhartos entertained the rest of the camp with a hair-raising story of past valor. Salōmē and Fareeha concentrated on the work, uninteresting though it was, but Angela made barely half the progress they did, so distracted she was by the Egyptian next to her. She looked *bored*, Angela realized: she had stalked off earlier and fetched her whetstone to sharpen the knife, and now it coursed through their vegetable fare—this night it included onions, beans, cabbages, turnips, and rhubarb—with speed and a touch of viciousness. Salōmē went to the wagon to fetch a few more provisions, and Fareeha stood there, her face unmoving, flipping the knife from hand to hand, the blade scintillating and swirling in the light. She was the picture of nonchalance; Angela realized that the manipulation of blades was to her as easy as breathing. Salome returned, tossing a couple more onions Fareeha's way; the tall Egyptian turned, arm extended, catching one and letting it roll into the crook of her arm as she caught the second, the blade held in her other hand all the while. With a flick of her wrist, the onions landed on the cutting board, and Fareeha brought her blade to bear on them. Angela stared at Fareeha's biceps, at the bunching and relaxing of the muscles, and nearly sliced her thumb off cutting a turnip.

Angela was deep in a dreamless sleep that night when a firm, calloused hand on her arm roused her. She opened them blearily, only to squeak when she saw Fareeha's face close in front of her—but before said squeak could escape, Fareeha's finger was on her lips. Angela saw grave concern in the Egyptian's eyes, and something fearful crawled in the back of her mind. *Something is amiss.* It was late; the moon shone gibbous overhead, and the stars were bright.

Lowering her finger from Angela's lips, she raised it to her own in the universal gesture for silence. She then pointed to the periphery of the clearing in which the caravan had decamped. Angela squinted, trying to ascertain by the ember-light of the dying campfire what exactly Fareeha was pointing at—but then she saw, and her blood ran colder than cold.

There were shapes moving at the edge of the campsite, ducking behind bushes and trees, gesturing at each other with complicated hand signals. Angela caught sight of black leather armor, and she gave an involuntary shiver of fear.

Talon. They are back. Zeus, protect us.

Fareeha gripped her arm again. She gestured towards Reinhartos's wagon, making a tapping gesture that Angela hoped meant *go wake Reinhartos up*. She nodded. Fareeha made another gesture, one low to the ground, and Angela felt confident that it meant *stay low*. Another nod of acknowledgement, and Fareeha squeezed Angela's arm, then shifted away, silently, crouched so low she was nearly crawling.

Angela mustered up all the courage she had and began the slow crawl over the handful of cubits that separated her from Reinhartos's wagon. *How did they find us?* she asked herself frantically. *We were well-disguised, we told no one the object of our journey. Is there a spy among us?*

Hands clammy and limbs shaking, she carefully made her way to Reinhartos's wagon, still on her hands and knees. The older man's cacophonous snoring shook the wagon; she shimmied up its side, under the cover of the fabric that covered it, and tiptoed her way to Reinhartos's side, careful not to upset any of the sundries that lay strewn about the wagon's interior. She made it, somehow, and knelt at Reinhartos's side, drawing a hand to his mouth and the other to his shoulder.

"Doctor... what is the — *mmph!*" She covered his huge mouth with her hand.

"Talon," she whispered frantically. "Fareeha spotted them. They're here, Reinhartos, and they're surrounding us." His eyes widened, then hardened, determination lighting them up. "I don't know what to do," she begged. "They will—"

"Hush, child," he whispered hoarsely. "Hide here. I will rouse the soldiers. Stay out of sight. We will need your help when the battle concludes. How many?"

"Two dozen, at least." she whispered.

"And you said Fareeha is awake?" he asked. Angela nodded mutely.

Reinhartos smiled. "Excellent. We shall see the daughter of the Falcon lay waste to our enemies." He shimmied out of the wagon, padding to its side and out of sight.

Angela found herself alone with her fears and alone in the wagon. Her hands shook. *They'll have heard the stories. If they find the blonde doctor, they'll string you up and leave you to die, if you're lucky. If you're unlucky, they'll do much, much worse,* said an nasty internal voice. She did her best to push it out of her mind, electing instead to move slowly and carefully towards the mouth of the wagon. She hunkered down near it, affording her a decent view of the clearing. Her heart hammered in her throat.

Then, a cry of battle: "**TO ARMS! TO ARMS! OUR ENEMIES LAY SIEGE TO US!**"

Reinhartos's voice was impossibly loud; she saw all the members of the caravan sit up abruptly, rubbing the sleep from their eyes, then hunkering down when they learned of the situation. She saw the few soldiers they had brought along scramble for their weapons. Reinhartos stood, lit faintly by the fire's embers and outlined by the light of the moon, and in his hands he bore a wagon wheel and axle, held aloft in the manner of a sword and shield.

Shouts emerged from the treeline, and she heard the *pock* of bowstrings and the menacing whistling of arrows. She cringed further into the wagon's side. She saw Reinhartos take cover, swift despite his size, shielding his face with the wagon wheel and bringing the axle up into a combat stance.

"Bring it on! I **LIVE** for this!" he bellowed, his shoulder lowered and ersatz shield held high, charging towards the treeline. *Protect him, Ares,* Angela prayed silently. She heard the clang of

steel on steel; the caravan's few soldiers had presumably engaged Talon's forces in combat. She shortly heard cries of injury and the telltale impact of armored bodies on the ground. She was not sure which side bore the falling combatants, but panic wormed its way into her guts nonetheless. *They have the advantage of night*, she thought. *We may not survive this.*

And then the sound of flint on steel, and a high, manic giggling from Junkrat's wagon. *What on earth is that lunatic doing?* She saw him stick his gaunt face out of his wagon, scanning around in search of something. And then a telltale *hiss* of ignition, then a high-pitched grunt, and something round and black, a flaming fuse attached to it, was heaved into a shadowed copse.

Silence, for a moment, and a loud **bang**, and then: *fire*. The trees, pine and fir, were suddenly aflame, great gouts of fire licking upwards, spurred on by the resin coating the bark, the bracken and undergrowth beneath consumed nearly instantly. Angela saw Junkrat silhouetted before the flames, cackling like a hyena, arms raised in pyromanic joy. She saw him reach down again, pulling another of these round projectiles into his hand, fingers striking again at the flint and steel, and with further deranged laughter tossing another one at a group of their foes who, much to their misfortune, happened to be standing still, agog at the roaring flames. She heard another loud *bang* and some agonized shrieks of pain, and prayed to the gods that their deaths would be quick.

Light filled the clearing, now, and Angela had a chance to assess the state of the battle. Reinhartos and Fareeha were back-to-back, surrounded but evincing no fear; Fareeha's eyes were hard, hostile slits, and Reinhartos's were wide with the savage glee of battle. Reinhartos gave a yell —"**now!**"—and they moved forward together, nearly symmetrical, as though they had been fighting together for years; Fareeha's curved blade lashed out, liquid with its speed, and its curved hook embedded itself in the side of one of her assailants. He cried out, and doubly so when she pulled him towards her with a mighty **yank**; as he stumbled towards her, she met his face with a mighty blow from the shield, and he fell to the ground, unmoving. Angela, despite the fear that still coursed through her veins, marveled at the brutal elegance. *Her shield is much a weapon of war as her sword*, Angela thought, enraptured despite her terror. Behind her, Reinhartos finished his dash forward, catching an opponent's sword in the spokes of the wagon wheel, then swung the axle with all his might to the left; it struck true, impacting an assailant's head squarely, and Angela saw blood spray into the air, accompanied by a nauseating *crunch*, like that of a watermelon dropped from a great height. And both Fareeha and Reinhartos took several steps to the rear, meeting back-to-back again, partners in some grand yet murderous dance.

Angela heard a booming, vicious growl to her left, low, loud, visceral, and she saw Roadhog burst from behind his wagon. In his hand he dragged a length of iron chain, each link at least as thick as her wrist, impossibly heavy, and her eyes widened when he began to swing it over his head, his body twisting and his eyes wide with the effort. The chain began to sing a path through the air, howling with its speed, and with a gravelly *grunt* he began to stride forward. From her hiding-place, she saw two of the black-clad enemy force turn their heads towards each other, as if in disbelief, then raise their crossbows, firing at him. She squeaked in terror, afraid that the giant would be skewered, but she saw their projectiles splinter to bits, caught by the chain's gyration. And then with another bellow, Roadhog *ran* forward, his speed belying his bulk, and his two foes turned to flee. But the length of the chain was inescapable—she saw one's head nigh-disappear as it met the spinning chain, his body flopping like a gut fish in its death throes. The second attacker was a few paces away from Roadhog, and Angela thought he had a chance to escape, but Roadhog ducked, swinging the chain low, around the fleeing man's legs, and she heard the *snap* of breaking bones and a cry of agony from the man as he impacted the ground. Roadhog strode over towards the man's head, raising a foot over the man's neck. Angela closed her eyes, cringing, but heard the wet sound of a boot on, and through, a throat.

She saw Genji, his long sword still in its sheath, shimmy up one of the flame-free trees. *He'll break his neck*, she thought, terrified, but kept her eyes fixed on him: he grasped at a sturdy-

looking bough then swung himself upwards, impossibly agile, into a fork of the next tree over. She saw his dark eyes surveying the battlefield, in the manner that a hawk surveys rabbits, then he leapt again, several cubits down, landing on another bough. He ran—yes, ran, his steps surer than any gymnast Angela had witnessed—along the length of the branch, then dove off of the end, and Angela's stomach clutched in horror—but he landed safely, nearly silently, a few cubits away from a remaining attacker who persisted in firing arrows towards the caravan and its soldiers. She saw him draw his sword, pacing up silently behind his foe, and then run him through, the blood on his sword black in the light. Genji unceremoniously ripped the fallen man's quiver from his corpse and took up the bow himself, and before she knew it he was firing arrows with blinding speed, felling at least three of the black-clad assailants.

We are winning, Angela thought, hope stirring in her guts. A few of the caravan's soldiers lay dead, but Talon's fallen dotted the clearing. The Talon assailants were shouting to each other, fear crossing their faces, and she saw at least two turn to run. Roadhog had a black-clad opponent in a chokehold, the man's arms scrabbling wildly against the giant's form; Angela saw Junkrat dart outwards, his laughter now devolved into deranged screeching, and bring a viciously curved dirk up and into the helpless man's stomach. Genji's arrows picked off what stragglers still remained.

The last living attacker threw down his weapons and hightailed it into the woods. The defenders looked around, still suspicious, then, as they lowered their arms, a cheer ran between them, a jubilant and exhausted one, one of hard-won victory.

"Knew I was right in bringing them grenades," Junkrat burbled animatedly as the caravan's warriors regrouped. "You hear em scream, Roadie?" Roadhog was heaving with exhaustion, the giant chain still held in his hand; Angela noted, with a wince, bits of brain and hair still dotting its length. Blood ran from several wounds on his shoulder and belly. Salōmē scuttled forward towards him, some cloth rags held high, and began to staunch the flow of blood; he gave an appreciative grunt. Zenyatta was already at Genji's side, whispering something approving in their strange language.

Angela scanned the battlefield. *But where is Fareeha? And where... where is Reinhartos?* she thought, frantically—

and then a voice, one she thought she recognized, but that she could not name—

"ANGELA! ANGELA!"

She rose to her feet, unsteady with the adrenaline, following the source of the calls. It came from quite far away, out of sight of the campfire, a few cubits behind the treeline. Angela's feet were bare, and painful against the pine needles and cones that padded the ground, but she paid them no heed: fear for Reinhartos gripped her stomach. *Not him. We cannot lose the Lion.* She rounded a tree and her heart sank: Reinhardt was prone, his face contorted in pain, the smell of blood in the air. An arrow jutted viciously out of his armpit; Fareeha, her hands soaked in blood, was pressing on the wound; it spurted with his heartbeats, and Angela's heart sank. *An artery.*

What? Then, who called?

And Fareeha's mouth opened, and from it came words that Angela understood.

"He is losing blood. Quickly. Help me."

Fareeha was talking. In Greek. To her.

Angela gawked, gawped, her head swimming. Fareeha's Greek was gently accented, ever-so-slightly halting, but strong, commanding.

Fareeha fixed her with a quizzical look. "Do not simply stand there. He loses life with every second."

And Angela found her voice, loudly and accusatorily:

"*YOU SPEAK **GREEK**?!"*

Chapter End Notes

problematick filled me with inspiration for this chapter, especially with Reinhardt's axle/wheel weapon loadout, an image which makes me laugh every time.

As always, drop me an [ask](#) should you have comments or feedback.

Also, 30k words. *gawps* *pinches self*

Frenzy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Angela was dumbstruck. Her head swam, her hands shook, and through her poured shock, incredulity, anger—a current of emotions, wordless and voiceless save for one coherent thought:

Why did she keep this from me?

Words rose to her lips, cruel and bilious and cutting ones, but she glanced at Reinhartos's pale, lined face and she stuffed them down inside with all her might. She pressed her hands to the man's wound, feeling the blood gush with every heartbeat; her hands met Fareeha's, but she ignored the brief contact. The breeze was warm, but Angela felt only cold, the sort of cold that curls deep inside one's guts and numbs from within.

"What *happened*?" Angela spat.

"Sharpshooter. Behind a tree. I thought we were clear. He took the arrow meant for me." Fareeha's voice was cool, flat, but at her mention of Reinhartos's heroism Angela thought she heard a slight quaver. Angela looked at Fareeha in the half-light; she was drenched in sweat, dotted faintly with specks of blood, her chest heaving, her eyes still darting about for any remaining threats. Her sword and shield lay on the ground at her side, hastily-discarded, soaked and smeared in blood.

"Doctor..." Reinhartos groaned.

"And the shooter? What of him?" Angela scanned the treeline cautiously, ignoring Reinhartos's moans.

"Gutted him," she replied, gesturing the ruined remains, lying in two separate heaps, of something that had once been a man. Angela winced and returned her eyes to Reinhartos's form. The arrow jutted out viciously from his armpit. *This is bad*, Angela thought. *It's deep. Gushing. Means that it's hit the axillary artery.* She held the arrow's shaft as gently as possible and, with a quick movement, snapped all but a few *dactyloi* from its length. The light from Junkrat's impromptu forest-fire was faint at this distance; she could not see the extent of the damage, but she knew that it was deep, too deep to merely yank out. *But it has to come out, and soon. Every time he moves it cuts deeper.* She remembered a similar wound she had seen in Napoli, how she had learned that pressure against the first rib could stave the flow from such a wound, and she pressed two fingers against his side as hard as she could.

"How long has he been like this?" Angela asked, not looking up. Blood ran down the back of her hands in crimson rivulets. The twigs and pinecones scattered across the forest floor dug painfully into her shins and knees, but the discomfort was the farthest thing from her mind.

"Three minutes. No more. I yelled for you as soon as I could."

She looked up at Fareeha, jaw clenched and voice steely. "Run. Grab my trunk, and a torch, and bring Makonnes here. He is the only one among us who can lift him. Salōmē, too. *Run*, damn your eyes!" Fareeha took off, leather armor creaking and robe flapping in the night, and Angela caught herself staring, again, before her anger and the situation's enormity brought her back to reality. She ripped strips from Reinhartos's chiton, just as Fareeha had done for her with the wolves, and attempted gainly to slow the bleeding, with limited success.

"Stay with me, you ox of a man," she barked. "If you survived *atropa*, you can damn sure survive some coward's arrow." She checked his pulse: his heart was strong but the flow was irregular.

"I have... no plans to die here," Reinhartos gasped.

I have saved him twice. Asklêpios, help me make it thrice, Angela prayed.

Roadhog and Fareeha returned shortly, each carrying an end of Angela's ebon trunk, Salômē hurrying behind, her hand to her mouth. Angela flew into action: clean cloth for the wound, smelling salts to keep him conscious, liquor for the pain, and a torch, held by a pale but unflinching Salômē, that allowed Angela to see the extent of the wound. It was rough, jagged, a sickening aperture into muscle and sinew, punctuated by the broken arrow.

"Hold his hands. This will hurt him, but I need to check if it has struck bone." Fareeha and Roadhog took his hands, and Angela grasped the shaft of the arrow and moved it in the wound, from side to side. Blood poured afresh, and Reinhartos's roars echoed through the forest, but Angela did not flinch. She breathed a prayer of thanks when it moved somewhat freely: had it been lodged in bone, there was little she could have done to extract it, short of prying it out with a forceps.

"Get him to the wagon. I will extract the arrowhead. Then we must ride to somewhere safe where he can rest."

With a mighty *grunt*, Roadhog threw Reinhartos over his shoulders in a fireman's carry. The older man's blood poured down Roadhog's bulk, but he paid it no mind, breaking into a trot despite the weight he carried. Angela looked towards Fareeha, who already had the trunk in her arms. They nodded and followed Roadhog back to the caravan.

Many of the travelers panicked upon seeing Reinhartos's barely-conscious form and pale face, but Salômē, with a steel that belied her humble status, had snapped into activity, dealing out orders sharply and with verve: they were to ride to Tegea despite the cover of night. Roadhog, having gingerly lowered Reinhartos into the back of the older man's wagon, was, set to breaking limbs off trees for torches; his bulk meant that he barely had to hang on to even the sturdiest bough before it snapped off as though merely a twig. Junkrat followed behind, collecting sap and pitch for fuel. Angela was ordered to tend to the ailing Reinhartos, and as always Fareeha refused to leave her side, though the doctor glared daggers at the Egyptian every chance she got. All other fellow travelers were ordered to pack their bags as though their lives depended on it.

The back of Reinhartos's wagon was crammed to bursting: Angela, Fareeha, Salômē and Roadhog barely fit in it, even despite having relegated much of its contents to other wagons. The smell of blood hung redolent in the air, and Angela inwardly wondered if she would ever escape that scent as long as she lived. Reinhartos was wheezing with the pain, but his lips were not yet blue. *We may have a chance*. He groaned and thrashed, emitting a string of choice profanity.

"Cease your bellyaching," Salômē ordered Reinhartos. "I have seen you through worse." Her voice was clipped, stressed, but not unkind.

"That is not... the way a servant speaks to her master," Reinhartos gasped resentfully, sweating and twitching with the pain.

"And this is not the way the Grey Lion dies, oh noble one," Salômē said with a roll of her eyes. She mopped his brow tenderly.

Angela gripped the handle of her scalpel tightly. "Salômē, find something for him to bite down on. You two, hold his arms: the less he struggles the easier this will be." Salômē returned with a

length of cloth, and Angela placed it between his jaws. She turned her head to the older woman. "You may wish to look away. This will be... unpleasant. For all of us, but for him the most."

Salome shook her head. She was pale, but a steely glint lay behind her eyes. "I owe him this much." She moved to the arm held down by Roadhog and held Reinhartos's hand, though it dwarfed hers.

"Fareeha. Take your other hand and apply pressure here"—she motioned to a spot above the man's clavicle—"and do not let up. It will staunch the flow to the artery." The Egyptian did so wordlessly.

Angela said a quick prayer to no god in particular. "Hang on," she whispered to the giant beneath her. "This is going to hurt a lot. But it will be over soon." She raised the scalpel to the wound, bringing the blade close to the arrow's length. And she cut deep, along the length of the wooden shaft, down, pressing in hard despite the blood that continued to flow, deep, several *dactyloi* in, until she felt her blade make contact with the arrowhead.

Reinhartos screamed in agony. Tears threatened to spring to Angela's eyes, but she repressed them, cutting deeper, one incision to the right and one to the left of the arrowhead. She waited until he had stopped struggling to put gentle pressure on the arrowhead; it was loose, for which she was grateful.

"Almost there. Hold him!" she barked at the attending parties. She reached inside the wound, fingers grasping the iron of the arrowhead, trying not to get cut herself—both her hands and the arrowhead were slippery, soaked in blood, and Angela was concentrating so hard that Reinhartos's bellows seemed far away—

—and her fingers found purchase—

—and she *yanked*, and the arrow bit into the flesh of her fingertips, and she cried out—

—but the arrow tore free of his flesh, and with lightning speed Angela brought cloth to the wound. And the blood blossomed freely against the fabric, but in her hand remained the broken arrow—its head was barbed, she noted, its sides studded with curved spikes that pointed away from the head, a nasty thing, unsuitable for hunting, made only to shred meat and sever vasculature.

Roadhog was the first to break the silence. And not with a grunt this time: a word, raspy, half-demonic, muffled by the leather mask but suffused with triumph:

"DOCTOR!"

And he raised his gigantic fists in the air. And all the eyes in the wagon went wide. And a smile crossed Salōmē's face, and she put two fingers in her mouth and whistled in approbation. And Fareeha just looked at her, softly, with adoration and awe etched on her features.

And for the first time in a long time, Angela felt sick—she used to vomit after damn near every surgery, in the old days with the Roman legion—and she scrambled to the side of the wagon, and the spit pooled in her mouth, thin and tepid, as her gorge slowly rose and she expelled what little she had eaten that day. She heaved, cough, spluttered.

She felt a strong hand on the small of her back. And the low, lilting voice, again, still so strange but so familiar:

"You have done enough. You must get some rest."

Angela swallowed the spit and chyme, but all the cruel words that she had repressed back in the woods came to light. "Don't *touch* me," she hissed, turning, eyes flashing. She vaulted the side of the wagon, landing ungainly, hands and tunic still russet with Reinhartos's blood. "Don't follow me. I mean it. I *mean* it, Fareeha."

She stalked, in high dudgeon, over to Junkrat and Roadhog's caravan, where the smaller man was wrapping strips of tar-smear cloth around broken lengths of branch. "Waterskin," she spat, and with a frightened look Junkrat complied, tossing her a weathered, half-full skin. She poured the tepid water over her hands, scrubbing away the blood with the few clean portions of her chiton, gritting her teeth in adrenaline and rage and frustration. She splashed water on her face, trying to take deep breaths, willing her heartbeat to slow. She met with little luck.

They rode in silence. All the members of the caravan carried torches; travel in the night was risky, as its cover emboldened bandits and predatory animals, but Angela had made it clear that Reinhartos would not see the morning if they waited. Owls hooted overhead, punctuating the steady sounds of feet and the creak of wagon wheels. They were, after the departures in Corinth and losses sustained in the battle, no more than twenty in number. The four remaining soldiers did their best to form an escort phalanx around the handful of wagons that still accompanied the caravan.

Angela stayed at Reinhartos's side: he was pale but stable, the doctor noted, and if they made the walls of Tegea before the morning light he stood a decent chance of recovery. His shoulder would likely never be the same—muscle weakness was likely, nerve damage nearly inevitable—but her quick action, and the help of her compatriots, meant that he would likely keep his arm. And he continued to complain and swear, which Angela took as a good sign. Dying men had few words for anyone.

Angela rummaged in her trunk, pulling out the last of her bandages and examining her various jars and phials, squinting in the dim light as she attempted to discern their contents. She found what she was looking for—honey, turpentine, a half-full jar of white wine—and used the lid of a jar as a surface on which to soak the bandage in the various solutions. Preventing infections was an inexact science; most of her fellow physicians believed that night air, and the miasmata that it supposedly carried, led to infection and illness; Angela found this unconvincing, having seen men grow sick and die in both day and night. She had once heard, in Bari, an elderly, half-drunk physician hold forth on his theory that infections and disease were caused by tiny creatures, too small for the eye to see, that traveled both on matter and through air and were taken into the body. He had been roundly mocked by those in attendance for his implausible theory, but Angela suspected it might hold more truth than not.

She flipped the bandage over, smearing the sticky substance on both sides, then turned to Reinhartos's form. She raised the man's arm, despite his vocal protests, so as to have a better view of the wound, and slapped the bandage onto the still-gaping wound. She worked it in with her fingers, hoping that her meagre reserves of honey would be enough to at least delay the advent of infection. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the sleeve of her chiton, and swore wordlessly.

"You are... a talented doctor," Fareeha, sitting across from Angela, whispered. Angela hmphed and turned an elegant shoulder.

Fareeha blinked. "You are not speaking to me?"

"See how *you* like it," Angela hissed. "You treated me like a *fool*, Fareeha, a pantomiming fool. I trusted you and you kept everything from me. I'm *furiosus*."

"You are being ridiculous," Fareeha intoned quietly. Angela could hear the pain in Fareeha's

voice but, still turned away, could not see the manner in which her expression had crumpled. Angela gave no reply.

The caravan made it to the walls of Tegea in the earliest hours of the morning. The guards posted at the walls had been suspicious of a group arriving at that hour, but Angela's entreaties and Zenyatta's calm presence had convinced them to open the gate, and the caravan made its creaky way through the gate. Salōmē and Angela, the sudden de facto leaders of the caravan in Reinhartos's absence, had burst into an inn, rousing the bleary-eyed innkeeper. Keteus had pressed drachmae into the innkeeper's hand in exchange for a large room and a soft bed—and, in a surprising display of sangfroid and acumen, managed to mollify the innkeeper's alarm as several members of the party dragged the barely-conscious Reinhartos up the stairs. The rest of the caravan had returned to their beds—the wealthy had bought rooms in further inns, the not-so-wealthy slept in their wagons—but Angela, Junkrat, Roadhog, and Salōmē stayed up, huddling around a fire pit. There is an *esprit du corps*, an exhausted camaraderie that comes to those who have borne a horror together; it is quiet, reassuring, and lends itself well to long, comfortable silences such as the one they exchanged now.

Angela pulled tighter the heavy chimaton that she had nabbed from Reinhartos's wagon: fall was becoming winter now, and the wind cut close. To her left was Salōmē, idly weaving together a few strands of tall grass she had grabbed from a nearby tuft. To her right sat Roadhog, staring past the fire, his eyes offering no hint as to whatever was in his head; Junkrat was holding a ratty sponge and scrubbing what remained of Reinhartos's blood off of Roadhog's bulk, clucking to himself in disapproval. ("Roadie, you *know* that the blood will get into your leathers if you let it sit. And then you'll smell like a charnel house every time it gets hot outside. By the gods, you'd be lost without me.")

Angela was too tired to think, so she looked at Salōmē, who was lit from the front by the fire's glow and silhouetted by the very first rays of dawn. She was pretty; Angela could tell that she was one of those women who grew more beautiful with age, who settled into late middle-age rather than letting it run over her. Her greying hair was tied up behind her in her trusty tight bun, which accented her weathered but healthy skin, and her profile was noble: a strong chin, a slim and elegant nose, and wise hazel eyes. Her build was slim, but her back was straight, unhobbled by rheumatism or age, and her bearing spoke of the sort of strength bestowed by a lifetime of hard work. She had a wide mouth to which smiles came easily. Angela realized she was staring, and quickly moved her gaze to the other direction, where Roadhog sat, his hands on his knees.

"So, Makonnes. I was... unaware you could speak. I had assumed you mute. I apologize." Angela broached the silence.

"No. I have little need of words. Silence is easy." The voice was thick, guttural, but strong.

"You have always been the silent sort, then?" Angela queried.

"Since I was small. But... I like it. People think me a fool. They let down their guard, treat me like... furniture." he rumbled.

Angela did not quite know what to say. The memory of the hurt in Fareeha's voice, back in the wagon, flashed into her mind, and her gut made several unpleasant twists.

"I always watch them. I always remember. Never forget anything. Anything." He tapped the side of his head, and Angela gave a small smile. *An eidetic memory? How curious.*

"And then... should it comes time to break them... easy. I see their flaws. I remember

them."

Angela was silent for a few moments, lost in thought.

"I thought someone else was silent, too. Someone important to me. But they were not. And I grew very angry at them."

"**The pharaoh**", Roadhog said, and Angela saw his eyes twinkle. She gave a pained smile despite her hurt.

"...Yes. I was hurt. I wanted her to trust me. I wanted to *know* her. And she refused to let me. I do not understand why she did so."

Roadhog gave a massive shrug. "**She is in a strange land. Far from home. Protecting herself. From strangers. And maybe... from you.**"

"From *me*?" Angela spluttered, anger rising in her throat. "I pose no threat to her. I never—"

"**The doctor loves the pharaoh. Perhaps... the pharaoh loves the doctor, too. Warriors fear love. Love is a crack in their armor. One that they cannot repair.**"

And Angela found herself completely at a loss for words.

Chapter End Notes

I have, as always, [problematick](#) to thank a million times over for providing me with much needed guidance and impetus to get through this chapter. I also want to thank Harmacist, who is extraordinarily kind and who provided much-needed advice re. medicine and anatomy. This story is richer for her help. And I want to thank *you* for reading.

As always, check me out on [Tumblr](#) if you want to be updated as to when chapters go out and to read some behind-the-scenes look at this fic. I love talking with people who enjoy my writing, so feel free to send me a message, or just drop me an ask if you'd prefer to stay anonymous.

Détente

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Angela sighed, rolled over, and attempted to fluff her pillow for the fifth time in twenty minutes. She could not sleep. There were a multitude of things she could have blamed this on—the bed's wood was creaky and its mattress uncomfortable, a chilly draft blew in from a hole in the awning, and the noise of some drunken revelry in the inn's common room downstairs was ill-muffled.

But the real reason was this: she was sulking. Sulking about Fareeha, about that strange bodyguard who had inspired — no, *compelled* — her to throw all her caution to the wind, to join a troupe of lunatics and zealots on a journey to an abandoned military encampment. Madness, plain-and-simple.

I thought she was a closed book. But no, she wasn't closed: she had locked herself up tight, and hidden the key. And there I was, full of my assumptions, walking alongside her like some lovestruck youth. With a pained sigh she rolled out of bed; sleep, it was apparent, was not going to come easy tonight. *Might as well take a walk.* She threw on her heavy woolen chiton, retrieved her sandals from the corner where she had flung them in frustration, and stalked out the door, down the stairs, past the revelers and into the night.

Behind her, a hunched figure rose from its seat in the darkest corner of the bar, and gently, quietly followed.

She did not quite know where she was going, but she strode through the streets nonetheless. The late hour meant that the streets were relatively deserted, but youths, couriers, soldiers, and the odd horse-drawn cart still dotted the ways and thoroughfares, lit by dim and battered oil lamps and the few wind-whipped torches that burned outside gambling halls and tavernas. The night was quiet, underlaid by the steady chirping of crickets, the sound of feet on cobblestones, and the occasional far-off hooting of drunkards. An old man, hunched on a corner and reeking of wine, raised his head at Angela's passing; he mumbled something lewd, causing Angela to shoot him a dirty look and hurry along more quickly.

All those times I thought she couldn't understand me... she could, Angela thought, and a blush of angry embarrassment rose to her cheeks. *By her side at campfire out of Athens. In the room in Corinth. On the road, when Salōmē caught me staring. I've been a fool, a **fool**.*

She heard footsteps behind her, scarcely audible, and stopped in her tracks. The steps continued for one or two paces and then stopped in tandem.

She's following me.

She turned around, fury rising again, ready to unload all of her venom and resentment on the Egyptian—but was met only with an empty street. Her eyes narrowed, squinting, searching the shadows and crannies for any sign of banded leather armor or sweeping robe, but she found nothing, which put her in an even fouler mood. With a final scowl, she turned around and continued down the way, straining her ears for the sounds of footsteps behind her. She took a right turn, a left, walked a few blocks, any sort of destination forgotten—and then a building loomed before her, and she discovered her destination.

The temple of Athena at Tegea was, simply put, magnificent. Only that of Zeus in Olympia, many leagues away, surpassed it in size, and perhaps no other temple in Greece surpassed it in grandeur.

Angela could make out, in the dim moonlight cast through clouds, the myriad columns surrounding the main temple. Unlike most other buildings of stately grandeur, it mixed all three styles of Greek column—bare Doric, elegant Ionic, florid Corinthian—and yet somehow managed to retain the gravity and dignity befitting a house of Athena. Tegea was no small city—it boasted an agora, a stadium, many noble houses—but its temple remained the grandest construction therein.

Angela's sandals made a lonely sound on the marble of the ramp leading up to its entrance. It was normally guarded so as to keep drunks and beggars out during ceremonies, but tonight no attendants stood in her way, for which Angela was glad—she had little idea why she was here, and was at a loss as to how she would have explained it: *the woman assigned to guard me on some cockamamie, clandestine adventure to a crumbling seaside fortress has recently revealed herself able to speak my language, and I, having fallen head-over-heels for her, am, for several reasons, inexpressibly angry about this*. She imagined they would drag her off for disturbing the piece, or perhaps put her alongside the oracle at Delphi where she could babble all she wanted.

Six mighty columns, each many cubits thick, comprised the entryway to the temple, and bore above them a gable emblazoned with an a representation of the hunt of the Calydonian boar: the boar in the center, vicious and mean even rendered in marble, flanked by Atalantē, Meleager, Theseus, Polydeuces, Iolaus, and a host of other heroes that Angela could not identify in the dim light.

Angela did not dislike religion. Far from it. But she was never a fan of crowds, and to be in a crowd of people all doing the same thing, all beseeching the same invisible presence to cure what ailed them, gave her a deep sense of disquiet. Much better it was, she thought, to be alone in a temple; solitude provided space, tranquility, the opportunity to sit with, and to acknowledge, the sheer number of things she did not know, and the awe that this not-knowing invariably inspired in her. And she was alone, save for an old woman in the corner who dozed next to a few lit candles.

The interior of the temple was vast. The ceiling was three stories high: pillars, in the same three styles of the exterior, lined the inner walls, spaced a few cubits apart, punctuating and delimiting well-loved and well-polished marble. The occasional artifact and relic dotted the walls—particular prominence was given to the hide and tusks that were claimed to belong to the Calydonian boar, a proposition Angela met with a marked degree of skepticism.

The altar managed somehow to be lavish and subtle at the same time. Yet over it loomed a statue of Athena Alea that was the opposite of subtle: four cubits tall, wrought out of ivory, vast, breathtaking. Angela wondered what it would be to see through the eyes of a master sculptor: when they looked at a block of wood, a chunk of stone, a length of ivory, did they see the just the object? Or did they see all the things that the material could be, all the possibilities that churned beneath? Was this statue, for its creator, a process of creating something *ex nihilo*, or was it merely a process of removing the parts that prevented others from seeing what it could be?

She heard the footsteps again, hard to muffle on the marble floor, and her heart sank a little, defeated. She lowered her gaze from above and fixed her gaze forward, towards the wall, yet not seeing it.

"Come out." Angela's voice carried in the cold air. And from behind a pillar she heard a rustling, and footsteps, undisguised now.

"I told you not to follow me," Angela said, turning on her heel to behold Fareeha, clad in her trusty robe and an extra cloak for warmth, standing quietly behind her.

Fareeha looked lost. Angela realized that she had never before seen the taller woman without her

sword and shield. The autumnal wind was howling and cutting, and Fareeha gave a shiver every time it whipped in through the mouth of the temple.

"I... I know," Fareeha mumbled. Angela raised an elegant eyebrow and fought to keep her lip from curling.

"Then... why are you here?" There was a pause, and Angela's anger surged, and she was about to unleash a torrent of invective, when Fareeha spoke, slowly but clearly:

"When I was young, I was on a mission in our army. My third," she began, a pained hollowness sinking into her voice, "I disobeyed orders. It was the end of the war with your Alexandros. The last days. Reconnaissance. Trying to find the size of the Greek army. To learn whether or not the wives and children had to leave the city. I left in the night to scout out a valley near where we were camped. I wanted to find out if we could ambush from it. I was deep down in it when I heard cries. Shouting. I ran fast. As fast as I could. "

"I walked for days. Alone. Back to the city. I remember little. Thirst. And heat. And pain. And, when I recovered, my mother's harsh eyes. She looked at me with hatred. *I raised you to obey your orders. And now, with your comrades dead on the sand, you know why.* And that... was the last day I saw her. Her unit left town the next day."

"I swore never to neglect my duty. Never again. And when I found you in that clearing, with the wolves... I thought I had failed again." Fareeha's eyes flickered to the mottled, raw scars shooting over the length of Angela's forearm. "It felt like dying. Yet still drawing breath. I cannot survive it again. So, though you told me not to, I followed you. I must still serve y—"

"I don't *want* a servant," Angela snarled, interrupting. "I don't want *anyone* to be a servant, much less anyone to serve *me*."

Fareeha paused, clearly taken aback.

"What I want," Angela said, fighting back unwanted tears, "is to know *why* you wouldn't speak to me. Why the Lion had nearly to die before you would say my name."

Fareeha remained silent for several moments, and Angela was ready to explode with invective, when, suddenly:

"It is hard... to talk to you. You speak with grace. You use words I do not know. Your myths and legends are foreign to me. I wanted many times to tell you that I could understand, but then you started speaking your beautiful words, and my poor ones got stuck in my throat. Like bones." Fareeha swallowed hard. Her speech was not halting so much as it was deliberate, Angela noted; each word had a weight to it. "And so... I doubted. And still do. Doubt myself. Around you."

Angry words rose again to Angela's throat: *why on earth would you **doubt** yourself, you foolish woman, why, when you could defeat any warrior in Greece, when you could cleave an oak in twain, when with a flick of your shield you could force the very tides back into the sea?*

And then Angela remembered the early days in Athens, still seeking a position among the eupatridae, before Thäis, before Ioanna, before anyone: the sense of being *alien*. The feeling of people's gaze on her, drawn by her light skin and fair hair, and the disquiet that came when they wouldn't avert their gaze; the hard eyes and elevated prices offered by merchants at the agora; the inexorable sensation of disconnection she felt as she walked down her street past all the families who carefully ignored the strange foreign doctor. She had labored for months—years, even—to build up a rapport with people and clients around her—it was lonely. *And Greek was my mother tongue*, she thought to herself, confusion seeping in to her anger. *What would Athens have been*

like if Greek was new to me? I would have... I would have kept silent. Out of fear. To protect myself.

Like she did.

And then all her anger melted away, like a snowflake on skin, and where it once was there was only regret, chagrin, a yearning to explain herself.

"Fareeha, I..."

All her words seemed inadequate at that moment, so she threw caution to the wind and did what she had been wanting to: she threw herself forward and wrapped her arms around Fareeha, holding her close. She heard and felt the taller woman gasp.

"I'm sorry, Fareeha." Fareeha was in her arms, yes, Angela's words muffled by a broad shoulder, her form strong beyond imagining, to the point where she felt wrought out of copper or steel rather than flesh—but all that was far from Angela's mind: there was so much to say, so much to apologize for, so many conversations they had yet to have, a dizzying, voltaic chance to connect with this mysterious, magical woman. But the words would not come, and Angela wasn't quite sure what she would've done even if they had, so she settled on something simple.

"I haven't... been fair. Will you forgive me?"

"If... if you will me," Fareeha's eyes, usually so dark, had a lightness to them, visible even in the gloom of the temple. And the barest smile began to cross her lips, and those dimples began to emerge, and for a moment Angela felt faint. But she collected herself as best she could, released Fareeha from the hug (with perhaps a tinge of reluctance), squared her shoulders, and thrust out her hand, in greeting:

"Let's start again. My name is Angela Zeigla. I am pleased to meet you." A few frowns from Fareeha evinced a degree of confusion, but she stepped forward nonetheless and took Angela's hand in hers. Angela marveled inwardly at the size of the hands, thickness of the calluses, the strength of the grip, but she kept her gaze fixed on Fareeha's.

"...my name is Fareeha. Fareeha Amari."

The next night, they walked, not hand in hand, but side by side. Their silence had returned, but it was a comfortable one, a relieved one. The wind was chilly, but inside Angela felt only warmth. It was as though something had thawed inside her, something hard and cold and mean. Winter had not arrived yet, but for Angela, in some small way, spring was already here.

"They said... here," Fareeha murmured, gesturing towards an inset door near the street corner, outside of which a motley group of old men were playing dice and laughing uproariously.

"This... is a gambling house," Angela said, a note of disapproval creeping into her voice.

Fareeha pushed open the door to reveal a scene of barely controlled chaos. It was a low-ceilinged and cramped room, only managing to fit as many as it did by virtue of its considerable length. Every table was filled with revelers and merrymakers: sweaty men and alcohol-flushed women hooted and hollered at each throw of the dice, old men frowned and murmured insults at each other over their games of *ludus duodecim*, and all the while harried-looking serving-girls carried pints of ale and small vessels of tsukodia to and fro.

Angela spotted Roadhog's unmistakable silhouette far at the back of the room, and pushed forward. Without thinking, she reached backwards and took Fareeha's hand (had she turned

around, she would have seen the Egyptian's eyes go wide as doctor's pale hand met hers), dragging her forward, past the sweaty bodies of gamblers and the swaying forms of the half-drunk. At their approach, Junkrat emerged from the milieu, a half-crumpled metal tankard full of some unidentified liquid clutched in his bony hand, nearly colliding with a serving-girl and her tray full of further drinks.

"Doctor! This place is great! You can just play! And no soldiers will come to scrag you! And the booze is—well, it ain't good, hell, it ain't even *mediocre*, but it's cheap! And I'm pretty sure it won't make me go blind. I think." Junkrat proffered his tankard towards her; she took a tentative sniff and screwed up her face in response.

"How can you bear to drink that stuff, Iakobos? It smells like poison."

"I know! Great, isn't it?" She rolled her eyes, looking past Junkrat towards the assembled group of her companions.

Angela perceived what her compatriots were gathered around: the form of Zenyatta and that of a strange girl, one she had never seen before. She was young, no more than sixteen summers old, Angela reckoned; yet despite her youth she carried herself with a swagger and a confidence that most adults could never hope to achieve. She managed to keep up six different streams of conversation: waving at and greeting the friends and rivals that dotted the gambling house, sharing cackles of glee with an increasingly-intoxicated Junkrat, and managing to flirt dreadfully with Genji despite his inability to understand a word she said. But her attention was focused primarily on Zenyatta, who, Angela gathered, had just lost in a wager against this girl.

"I thought my studies would have granted me an advantage," Zenyatta remarked ruefully.

"You're good!" the girl chirped brightly. "Better than most! But you tense up when you shoot. I can see it in the way you wrinkle your brow. You have to stay *loose*." Angela recognized this game, now: "nuts", they called it, a game of skill. Roman, she remembered. The girl turned around, surveying the rest of the party: the gently-smiling Salōmē, the conspiratorially-whispering Roadhog and Junkrat, and the wallflower that was Keteus. At this last sight, the girl grinned, having apparently found a suitable source of prey.

The girl beckoned to Keteus, her smile wide and vaguely shark-like. "Come on. It'll be fun, friend. You know the rules? Throw the nut, land in the square"—she pointed to a square drawn on the floor with chalk, a few cubits away and ten dactyloi wide on each side—"win some drachmae. Feet here, shoulders back. I recommend the overhand throw, but some people use the underhand. And don't let your nerves get to you! That's crucial. Tell you what, if you make it your first throw I'll double your winnings."

Keteus stepped up. The gentle wattles of his chin wobbled, and Angela repressed a giggle. He looked lost at sea. The girl handed him the walnut, which he promptly fumbled onto the ground, drawing quiet laughter from the others. He bent down, ungainly, and placed it back in his hand. He made a few tossing gestures and swallowed hard.

And then, with a gentle flick of the wrist, he flicked the walnut upwards, in an elegant parabola. The onlookers held their breath as it fell to the dusty floor—landing exactly on the perimeter of that little chalk square, and tumbling gently into its center. And there was a moment of shocked silence, and then half the party broke into smiles and applause, while the other half let their jaws hang to the ground. The girl looked an odd shade of lily-green, Angela noted, smiling. Roadhog bellowed "**KETE!**" and then began chucking with such volume that the floor shook.

Angela threw a playful arm around the shoulders of a still-grinning Keteus. "Any word about your uncle, you young Croesus, you?"

"The innkeeper says he's eating solid food, and complaining mightily. I think he should be back on his feet in a few days, at which point we can leave—"

You're *leaving*? Nuh-uh! I'm coming with you. I am going to win back my *money*," the strange girl hissed, smiling despite herself. "Hey, big fella! Stay still a moment." She grabbed at Roadhog's straps, pulled, and vaulted herself onto his huge shoulders. She giggled. "This is a view! Pew pew pew!" She pantomimed the motion of shooting a bow.

Angela looked at Keteus. "I suppose, in your uncle's absence, you have the say over who joins and leaves us, Keteus. Will you have her?"

Keteus gave a flabby but smiling shrug. "I mean, why not? But, uh, don't you want to know where we're going first?"

"Nope!" The girl beamed and spun around on her heel. "This town is getting *dull*, 'tween you and me. No one gambles with me anymore. So I'm ready to go anywhere. My name's Hana!. Hana Aoide."

The caravan's members piled out the door of the gambling den and made their way, in various states of drunkenness, back to the inn. Keteus was bragging to anyone within earshot of his mighty prowess at gambling, Junkrat and Roadhog were opining that such establishments ought to be on every street corner, and Hana, presumably still looking for a place to sleep, was dropping boulder-sized hints that she might not mind bunking with Genji, who thankfully did not appear to comprehend her blatant flirtation. Angela and Fareeha, still sober, brought up the rear. And, as Angela looked around, at the faces of her compatriots old and new, and the gentle smile of the bodyguard next to her, an old proverb popped into her head, one of her favorites, about that time-honored subject, the family:

"Πολλοί συγγενείς, λίγοι λίγοι."

Many relatives, little by little.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this chapter took so long! My life has been crazy over the past few weeks (got unexpectedly fired, yet managed to find an even better job soon after). I hope to get the next one out in better time.

But! But! But! There is *fanart*. And it is so good.

[hana-blogs](#) drew [this PHENOMENAL set](#) of Fareeha/Angela images. It practically brought me to tears with how good it is. And [erughostcat](#) drew [this stunning composite](#) of Angela, Fareeha, Roadhog and Reinhardt—I love how noble Reinhardt looks, and how menacing Fareeha's expression is. And, last but not least, [sayonarainnocence](#) made [a book cover](#) for Messenger that I absolutely adore. Please view all of these and give them all the likes and favs.

As always, I have to thank @problematick for her essential help with this project—this chapter in particular felt like squeezing blood from a stone, and her encouragement and pushes in the right direction were what enabled this to get on AO3 instead of just festering on my hard drive. Love you!

Thaw

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A rip of a bandage, the wet sounds of ointment and unction, and low, profane grunts echoed over the foggy clearing. It was a cold morning; fall was long gone, and early winter had its hooks in the air and the earth. The caravan's members were preparing for yet another day on the road, and the familiar sounds of packing, organization, and coordination buoyed Angela's spirits. Her eyes fell on the figure of Reinhartos, finally on his feet after nearly a fortnight spent recuperating, and she strode over to their leader with a grin.

He was seated on a large rock, facing eastward, admiring the last moments of the sunrise, bare-chested and with arms held to the sky; Salōmē stood behind him, bandages in hand, replacing his wound's dressing. Angela caught a glimpse of the injury, and noted with relief that it was well on its way to healing: the aperture the barbed arrow had caused was thoroughly scabbed, yet bore neither pus nor any other sign of infection.

At the sight of Angela, Salome gave one of her wide smiles and waved gently, looping another length of cloth around Reinhartos's massive bulk and pulling it tight. Reinhartos winced and swore. "By all the gods, woman, can you not be any gentler?" the warrior queried angrily, his teeth gritted in pain.

"Oh, stop whining," Salōmē replied briskly. "It's a wonder you still have your arm. And that you didn't die of sepsis. You ought to be grateful you are still alive to experience this mild discomfort." She cast Angela a sardonic look, as though to say *look at this brave warrior, moaning like a child with a skinned knee*.

"Mild discomfort?! Mild discomfort, she says." Reinhartos gave a tremendous *harumph*, turning to Angela in mock outrage. "My arteries are severed by some coward's arrow, and my longtime servant describes it as mild discomfort. She truly is a master of understatement."

"And you, my lord, are a master of self-pity." With a final wet *smack* of application, she wrapped the bandage briskly twice over the wound, then stepped back to admire her handiwork. "Should last you past noontime. Perhaps even until sundown, if you behave yourself and do not move excessively." Angela smiled, beholding the old friends' squabble, before a voice behind her plucked her from her reverie.

"Good morning," Fareeha said, in that low, husky voice of hers. And Angela's heart flopped and thrashed like a fish caught on a hook.

that evening

Ever since Fareeha opened up to her in the temple, a subject had gnawed at Angela's brain. And so, one chilly evening, seated next to Fareeha in front of the campfire, as the sun's rays retracted over the horizon and the fog slowly crept over the hills around them, she broached it.

"Fareeha, you... you spoke of your mother. Back in Tegea. Will you tell me of her?"

"My mother is... was a warrior," Fareeha intoned quietly, staring into the heart of the campfire. "Ana Amari. The Falcon. The bravest warrior in all Egypt. She led armies."

"Reinhartos speaks often of the Falcon," Angela murmured. "I am embarrassed to admit that I

have never heard of her." Fareeha evinced mild surprise, and Angela smiled apologetically. "Not all of us are brave warriors. Some of us are just town doctors, unaware of the latest tales of heroism."

"Few faced her in battle and lived to tell of it," Fareeha stated simply. "The greatest archer in all of Egypt. Most of the men she killed never even saw her coming. And those that she fought face to face... she swept through them as a sickle through grain. She taught me to fight, ever since I was a little girl. I was fourteen before I ever landed a strike on her."

"She was defeated only once," Fareeha said matter-of-factly, "by the forces of your Alexandros." Angela's eyes widened a little. "She spent a day and two nights atop some high rocks, killing the invaders, even after the last of her men died on the sands beneath. When she ran out of arrows, she fought atop the rocks, slaughtering all who came to claim her, until she could no longer hold her sword."

Fareeha continued. "The next day, they dragged her to his palace, in chains, and she was brought before his throne. And they spoke, and before long he bade his guards to leave. Many hours later, she left, unshackled. I know not of what they spoke. But I wonder." Fareeha shook her head slightly, as if to wake herself from her reverie. "I wonder... many things about her."

"Your shield... is it her insignia?" Angela gestured at the well-worn bronze Fareeha carried on her back.

"Yes. This was not her favorite shield. She took that with her when she went east. But this was the one with which I trained. I am... fond of it," she allowed. "She made me run for hours, wearing it on my back, until either I fell or night fell. She was... stern."

"And... she no longer lives?" Angela asked delicately.

Fareeha's mien darkened. "She went east. Working for your people. That was three years ago. No one has seen her since. By the second year, I knew that she would not return. She is dead, somewhere. I hope she died fighting. She would be so angry if she died any other way."

They sat in silence for a while. Angela's heart was heavy. She gave a start when Fareeha broke the silence.

"As a child, I always asked her how many men she had slain. I wanted to be a warrior, brave, like her. She never said. As I grew older, I saw that asking her filled her eyes with pain, so I stopped. And then many years later, my first day in the army, I asked her again." A pause. "I saw the pain, again. But she told me."

A long pause. Angela ventured to break the silence. "How many?"

"She said she had lost count long ago."

two days later

"Take this." Fareeha's face was cool, unyielding. She held before her a quarterstaff, pointed towards Angela.

"Ex—excuse me?" Angela found herself completely at a loss.

"You must learn. There is danger here, and more soon. Fight with me. Defend yourself."

"I've never done this, Fareeha," Angela sputtered, protesting. "I am a doctor, not some sellsword."

"I... may not always be there to protect you," Fareeha said, carefully, and something inside Angela's heart twinged and twisted. "It is my duty to prepare you for all things. So: you must defend yourself. Now, place your body as to defend."

Angela squared her feet uncertainly and held up the quarterstaff in what she hoped was a convincing display of strength. "Like this?" she asked tentatively.

Fareeha suppressed a small smile. "No. Not like that. If you do not have one foot behind you, an attack will make you"—and here she leapt forward, quarterstaff thrusting out towards Angela's, impacting with a terrific *crack* and a terrified squeak from Angela. The blow was too much, and Angela staggered back, tripping over her sandals, and falling backwards—but Fareeha was there, catching her in a strong arm before she was halfway to the ground.

"—fall backwards."

Angela glared, then *hmped*, then failed to repress a smile.

"How do I"—Angela, returning to her feet with ever-so-slight reluctance, made some exploratory motions with the staff, attempting to strike an invisible foe but more-or-less just wagging it in the air—"how do I hit things with this? People. Not things. Hit people." She frowned. "Fareeha, I don't like this."

"No strikes today," Fareeha replied briskly. "And not tomorrow. You must learn to move first. And to breathe." She squared up, and Angela did her best not to stare at the way the muscles in her shoulders and arms tensed and coiled.

"Stay this distance from me," Fareeha ordered. "I move forward, you move back. I move back, you move forward. Keep staff up."

Angela gritted her teeth. *I was meant to heal, not hurt*, she thought sadly, and a memory returned, unbidden and unpleasant, of the Talon assassin she had faced all those weeks before, of his cruel laughter and his keening screams. She gripped the staff tighter.

"Good. Now... go." Fareeha stepped back, and Angela scurried forward.

"No. Too many steps. You lose balance." The taller woman stepped forward. "Keep your feet square. Do not watch my face. Watch torso."

The sun rose high as the two women sparred, peeking through and past clouds, stretching westward.

that evening

"Grandma!" Hana darted forward and clasped Salome in a crushing hug, at which Salome gave a somewhat-undignified yelp and nearly dropped the bundle of salted pork she was extracting from a wagon for the night's dinner.

"What do you want, you infernal child?" she asked with a wide, familiar smile.

"I want to know about the pretty doctor!" Angela went suddenly pink. *Please, Salome, be merciful.*

"Miss Zeigla is more than 'the pretty doctor' to you, Hana," Salome replied with a touch of sternness. "She has saved many lives, Sir Reinhartos's three times. It behooves you to recognize her for her skills, rather than her beauty."

"She is pretty, though."

"That she is," Salome allowed, and Angela tried and failed to suppress the grin that slid over her face.

"Why is her hair like that?" The question was impertinent, but it was difficult to be too angry at Hana.

"Her family comes from very far to the West," Salome replied. "She has spent more years traveling than you have in your young life, I reckon."

"And she's in love with Miss Fareeha!" Angela inhaled sharply at Hana's words, nearly choking on her own saliva, and only by the grace of several gods avoiding making a tremendous racket. She stared straight down at the ground, having graduated from pink to crimson. *Shut up shut up shut up shut UP*. Angela fought the temptation to cover her ears with her hands.

"Young lady," Salome replied, even more sternly than she had before, "it does not behoove you to go around making observations as to who loves whom."

"But she doessssss." Hana harrumphed. "I can see the way they look at each other! Sometimes they hold hands!"

Angela was well into the second stanza of an impromptu prayer for sudden death when a savior suddenly emerged: a massive bulk scurried forward and laid friendly hands on both Salome and Hana's shoulders.

"My oldest friend. And my newest friend!" Reinhartos's voice was gravelly and warm. "And what topic of discussion have we today? No doubt the Muses stand in thrall, hanging on every word." Hana gave a pleading look in Salōmē's direction, clearly praying that the older woman would demur—which, with a gentle smile towards Hana, she did, excusing herself to go and fetch more foodstuffs. Hana's shoulders slumped with relief, and, seeing an opportunity to escape, she scarpered away.

Angela mouthed a silent *thank you* towards Reinhartos as he pulled away from them. He winked at her, then ducked to her side, speaking sotto voce. "I heard the young one speculating loudly about your love life. You have saved me three times: consider that my first effort at returning the favor." His voice was not as quiet as he thought, as Angela saw Salome stifling a fit of giggles as she walked away.

several days later

It was the silence that Angela, having emerged, bleary-eyed, from a midday nap, first noted. Their caravan, small as it was, usually rang with orders, shouts, chatter—but at this moment, all were near silent. Angela struggled out of her sleeping bag—she had slept poorly the previous night, dreaming of naught but black-clad assassins and silver talons—and made her way questioningly towards the mass of her compatriots: young, old, warrior, servant, all were gathered, in a circle, around two figures she could not yet identify.

As she grew closer, something in her stomach tightened. The figures, encircled by the rest of the caravan's members, were two: Genji, his ebony training sword held high, with both hands, near his face, robe sashed tight around him with a strip of heavy cloth, and Fareeha, bearing a wooden sword and shield, facing Genji, her dark eyes locked on his slender but strong form.

Angela spotted Reinhartos a few cubits' distance away from her and hurried towards him. "What

are they *doing*," she began to whisper as she reached his side, "was there some fight? Some—"

Reinhartos cut her off with a raised hand. Without moving his eyes from the combatants in front of him, he moved the hand to her shoulder, comfortingly, and spoke quietly.

"Master Zenyatta arranged a practice duel between your bodyguard and his. Look—they hold wooden practice swords. There is no ill will—merely two fighters, testing themselves. Now, hush."

Angela took stock of the situation, and noticed, as the fighters circled each other, the difference in their stances. Genji's movements were short, clipped, a half-shuffle, and his he held up his longsword close to and parallel with his head. Fareeha, by contrast, was all languid movements, liquid, seemingly effortless, like a cat stalking its prey, sword and shield both held at ease.

And then Genji darted forward, faster than anything Angela had expected. He took short, quick steps, in a manner that would have struck Angela as comical were he attacking anyone else in the world but Fareeha. His swing began before he had closed half the distance to Fareeha, and its swiftness clearly took the Egyptian by surprise: she darted back, wrong-footed, barely deflecting the blow with her shield. Genji, wincing as his arms absorbed the impact, shrunk backwards, his eyes narrowed. Fareeha did her best to move the impact, leaning back on one knee and half-pirouetting with the other back to her feet. A murmur ran through the crowd.

He's fast, Angela thought. *And strong, too*. The sound of sword on shield had been loud enough to make her flinch, wooden though they were. The fighters had returned to circling each other again.

And then, with a leap into the air, a grunt, and a sword swung down, Fareeha attacked. Genji saw the blow coming and moved back, sword held up, parallel to the ground, to intercept it: the swords met with a tremendous *crack* of wood on wood, and Angela saw a wince run across Genji's handsome face. *He has but a sword with which to absorb her blows*, thought Angela hurriedly; *her shield impairs her movement, yes, but each of her strikes wears him down much more than his do hers*. Fareeha, still moving with the momentum of her previous blow, capitalized on her slight advantage, leveling a flurry of strikes towards the shorter man's flank. Genji blocked the blows, but did so in an ungainly fashion, and, realizing his disadvantage, took a few skipping steps backwards and out of Fareeha's range.

To her left, Angela saw Salōmē pressing a stern hand onto Reinhartos's shoulder, above his wound, presumably in an attempt to keep him in his seat: Reinhartos leaned forward, fists clenched, eyes wide and head jerking in time with each feint, parry, and blow. Angela would have smiled, but concern for Fareeha kept her countenance grave and her attention fixed on the battle before her. Fareeha was advancing on the retreating Genji, her face hard and eyes predatory, when, quick-as-a-wink, Genji dropped to his knees, his blade parallel to the ground, his left hand on the earth behind him. Angela gawked for a second—*what is he doing? Is he surrendering?*—and Fareeha, clearly unused to such a manoeuvre, halted her advance for just a moment.

The momentary hesitation was all that Genji needed. He swung his sword unhurriedly, across and up, towards Fareeha's ankles, and she jumped back, out of reach. And then, with a bloodcurdling yell and an explosion of movement, he spun around in a full-body pirouette, his left hand joining his right on the handle of his sword, the wooden blade aimed higher now, his speed incredible, much too fast for Fareeha to—

— *thwack!* —

"*Fareeha!*" Angela cried out involuntarily, her heart in her throat. The sound of ebon wood meeting flesh was unpleasant, pulpy, painful to the ear. But Fareeha stood tall, despite the nasty

welt Genji's sword had left on her upper arm; she rubbed the point of impact, smiling and giving a slight bow of congratulations to her opponent. Angela flushed at her outburst yet clenched her hands into fists. *Come on, my darling. I know you can defeat him.*

My darling? she thought in surprise. *Where... where did that come from?*

Her train of thought was interrupted by Fareeha and Genji's resumption of their fighting stances. The onlookers quietened as the combatants began circling each other again. Fareeha, Angela noted, appeared to have taken some cues from Genji's fighting style: though her steps were more languid than her opponent, she had abandoned all trace of unnecessary motion. Genji, too, had changed his stance, lowering his sword and moving in a slightly more fluid manner than he had previously. Fareeha's eyes were fixed on Genji's feet, waiting for something—and, when he took a longer stride than usual, she launched herself at him, her shield held high and the point of her sword leveled at him.

Genji stepped back, his eyes wide, taking in the ferocity of the Egyptian's assault. He took hurried steps back, holding his sword across his body to meet the impact of Fareeha's shield against his chest. The crack of wood on wood was, again, deafening, and the combatants stared each other in the face, jaws clenched and gazes fearsome, before, quick-as-a-wink, Fareeha gave a mighty *shove*, propelling Genji back, off-balance for a couple of steps—long enough for her to take advantage. With a skip forward and a hard swing of her sword to the right, she struck at Genji's side, below the ribs. He gave a gasp of pain, yet regained his footing, stepping nimbly back as though nothing had happened.

"One to one," Reinhartos whispered. "Next strike wins it all." Angela swallowed thickly, her palms sweaty and her heart beating fast. *You can do this, Fareeha*, she thought fervently. She remembered the way Fareeha had rescued her from the wolves, the yell that had erupted from her throat as she slung her shield down into the wolf's head. *No one in the world can defeat you. I know this. I know this.*

Fareeha and Genji sized each other up for the final time. They circled each other, again, unhurriedly: the seconds dragged on as they sized each other up, waiting for a flaw to appear in the other's guard. Angela dug her nails into her palms and held her breath—and then, with mutual grunts, they flew at each other, swords meeting, clashing, whirling, the sounds of impact percussive and furious. Amazed murmurs began to emerge from the crowd, escalating soon to shouts and whistles.

And then, with fearsome swiftness, Fareeha fell to one knee—Genji's sword swung over her head, missing her by a few *dactyloi*, and another yelp leapt unbidden from Angela's throat—and, lashing out with her right foot, delivered a solid kick to the back of Genji's knee, eliciting a gasp from the crowd. He staggered, attempting to pivot away from the Egyptian's whirling form, but he was too slow: she sprang upward, whirling to her right, a yell erupting from her throat, bringing her sword up, across, over, and down, with blinding speed, towards Genji's neck. Angela cringed, covering her eyes—*she'll hurt him!*—only to spot, when she peeked through her fingers, that Fareeha had halted the progress of her blade right before it made contact with Genji's neck.

A shocked silence possessed the crowd—and then, lowering his sword, Genji took two steps back and bowed deeply to Fareeha. Fareeha inclined her head in response, clearly impressed with her opponent's acumen, breathing heavily and sweating (Angela bit her lip as she stared at the sun's glint off of the tanned, sinewy biceps) despite the cold. And the onlookers erupted in cheers and whistles, expressing their respect and admiration for such first-class swordsmanship, with loud whoops both from Hana and Reinhartos. Angela's eyes met Fareeha's as the taller woman slung her sword and shield onto her back, and Angela realized—a beat too late—that her face was arranged in something akin to unabashed reverence. The Egyptian's features darkened just a

touch.

Is... was that a blush? Oh. Oh.

But then, a hand on her shoulder, and, turning around, an apologetic Zenyatta.

"Please forgive me, miss Zeigla," he began, regret heavy in his voice. "I permitted them to spar without thinking of your feelings. This was remiss of me." Zenyatta made a deferential bow. "The two of them were practicing, and I found myself thinking out loud, as Genji tells me I so often do. I ruminated upon the mechanics at play with such different weaponry and fighting styles, and before I knew it they were sizing each other up." He gave a small sigh. "The teachings I follow say to keep others' thoughts in my mind, so as to bring advancement and harmony to all those around me. I do not always succeed."

Angela smiled. "It's quite all right, Zenyatta. It was exciting, wasn't it? I know little of the warrior arts, but their techniques were so different. So fascinating to see the clash of... oh, Fareeha!" The blonde interrupted herself at the sight of the rapidly-worsening bruise—an ugly thing, already purple and fetid-green—on the woman's left bicep. Fareeha, unsurprisingly, was oblivious to it: she and Genji had, despite the language barrier, traded weapons, each testing the weight and heft of the other's weapon and smiling at the strangeness of an unfamiliar sword in their hands. Zenyatta smiled as Angela rushed to Fareeha's side, grasping the taller woman's forearm and examining the wound, such as it was, for any signs of permanent damage.

"Hold on to that love, doctor," Zenyatta whispered to himself. "We will need it where we are going."

Chapter End Notes

Okay. So. I know it's been *forever* since my last update. Thank you all so much for your patience. I have no excuses to offer, besides the stress of my new job and the fact that my country of residence just flushed itself down the toilet.

At this point, I know better than to make any promises about getting the next chapter out—but it should be easier than this one. (The fluffy chapters are often harder to write than the ones dealing with plot advances, for some reason.)

I very much hope you like it. Please leave a comment if it moved you. And thank you, as always, to my beta reader and dear, dear friend problematick. None of this would be possible without you.

Fracture

Chapter Notes

A few vocabulary words this go-round:

ephors—a group of five elected elders in the Spartan government. Sparta had an interesting government in which two separate kings shared power with the ephors and the gerousia, in a sort of ancient attempt at checks and balances.

lochos—the fundamental building block of an ancient Greek army. Historical sources disagree on the number of men in a *lochos*; I've chosen to portray them as having a few dozen men.

morae—larger units of men (approximate 600), built up of lochoi.

helotes—the slaves of the Spartan state. Despite the Spartan portrayal in popular culture as guardians of freedom, the Spartan state ran on slave labor. The helots were treated appallingly.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The wind was high and the sun was low. Angela and Reinhartos, leading the caravan south towards Sparta, made steady passage along the dirt road, keeping their eyes peeled for a glimpse of the Spartan city itself. Birds twittered overhead, their night-song punctuating the gentle sussurances of the gusts through the rushes lining the road. The hills rolled gently around them, occluded by vegetation and the odd gnarled tree.

"How is your arm, old ox?" Angela broke the silence. Her question was light, friendly, yet had a measure of concern to it.

Reinhartos extended his left arm in response, testing it, rotating his shoulder, flexing the joint of the elbow. Angela watched, noting the slight hesitance to his movements: she had removed the bandage over the wound in his armpit that morning and had, finally giving into his protests, let him discard his sling.

"It is... different," he said, after a while. The breeze blew between them, bringing with it the scent of winter's desiccated vegetation. "The feeling here"—he tapped on the forearm beneath his palm—"is mostly gone, far from the wound though it is. But what has me most worried is that my grip"—and here he made and flexed a mighty fist—"is weak. I can feel it. It will hinder me in battle." A frown crossed his face.

Angela gave a grave nod. "Injuries like yours are strange. There is a network within the body, in which each part is interconnected with all others. And when it is wounded, even once it heals, the weakness persists. I do not understand it. I am not sure anyone does."

As the party made their way through the hills, further toward the city, its outline came slowly into into view. Despite the near-twilight, Angela could see the layout of the city: two rivers ran together, and in the delta thus created lay five separate clusters of buildings, homes, and edifices. Despite the gloom and the shadow cast by the nearby mountain, Angela could make out a grand temple at the center of the city. But there was something strange about the city, something missing

"Where... where are the walls?" queried Angela, her brow furrowed.

"Sparta has not had city walls for five hundred years," replied Reinhartos solemnly. "Lycurgus decreed that Sparta would have walls built not of stone, but of men. And thus have they survived hence. Mount Taygetos"—he gestured to their right, where the mountain range sat, silhouetted by the setting sun, stretching across the horizon—"prevents invasion from the west and the south, and the shields and swords of the *morae* prevent those who would come from the east or the north."

"And there they remain, immovable: even the assembled armies of Xerxes did not approach Sparta. And it was Spartan might, combined with Athenian ingenuity, that slew Mardonius and drove the Persians from our lands, when all other Greeks fell to their knees before the invaders." He gave an approving grunt. "They are a strange folk, but we are lucky to share a nation with them. It has been many years since last I stepped foot here."

"Salōmē said that they refused to help when the Macedonians invaded," Angela pointed out. "If they are so strong, then why did they stay their hands?"

Reinhartos gave a shrug. "I doubt the Spartan presence would have helped. I fought at Chaeronea, where we outnumbered the Macedonians and were vanquished nonetheless. And, in refusing to send their troops, they remained well-guarded and unbowed, though all the other states were brought beneath the foreign yoke. They provided hope for those of us who had little."

Angela nodded.

"I had just joined the army when Philip began his invasion from the south. He swept through the southern provinces like a wolf through a herd of sheep. He sent a messenger to the *ephors*: 'if I invade, Sparta will be destroyed, never to rise again'. Can you guess as to what their reply was?"

Angela made a quizzical gesture. "What was it?"

Reinhardt smiled a toothy grin. "One word: *If*. And he did not."

As the caravan reached the outer borders of the city, a voice rang out from the half-darkness, cold, and commanding:

"*Halt*."

And from the shadows there emerged soldiers—Angela counted threescore visible, with more no doubt lurking out of sight—all bearing spear and traditional bronze shield, their faces left bare by their *pilos*-style helmets. Angela, having heard tales of Spartan weaponry but never seen it in person, suppressed a gasp at the sheer size and heft of the shields. She doubted she could lift such a shield with both hands, but each soldier carried theirs as though it weighed nothing at all—on one arm, no less. Their red cloaks looked black in the half-light.

"We come with peace in our hearts," Reinhartos called out, voice stentorian. "I am Reinhartos Uiliam, warrior and *eupatrida* of Athens. I seek an audience with your *ephors*."

"Move not, son of Athens." The bearer of the voice—the soldiers' commander, Angela inferred—strode forward.

As the soldier came into view, two things became apparent: Firstly, she was a woman. Stern-faced, yes, clad in breastplate and red cloak, yes, but a woman nonetheless.

Secondly, she was more formidably built than anyone Angela had ever seen. She did not match the height of Roadhog or Reinhartos, no, but her arms and legs were massive in their musculature, at least the size of Reinhartos's but as scarred and as toned as Fareeha's or Genji's. On her back was slung a spear and a simply massive sword, two hands wide and nearly as tall as the woman who carried it.

She glanced to her left, and saw, to her surprise, a smile crossing Reinhartos's face.

Does he know her?

The woman took several steps forward, drawing herself up to her full height before Reinhartos—and then, with gravity and deference, inclined her head to him.

"General." Her voice was loud, cutting, harsh.

"Alexandra. I am no longer your general. Your deference is not necessary."

The woman—Alexandra—nodded. "That is so. It has been many years." Reinhartos reached out his hand, and Alexandra met it with hers. They shook; Reinhartos's smile widened, and a measure of asperity left Alexandra's face.

"It is good to see you again, young one. You"—Reinhartos gestured to the soldiers that surrounded them—"have become a fine commander, as I knew you would. This is your *lochos*?"

Alexandra inclined her head in response to the compliment. "Yes. Strong men."

Reinhartos nodded. "I would expect nothing less." A wind blew through and ruffled the commanders' cloaks.

"I seek an audience with the *ephors*, Alexandra," Reinhardt intoned. "Talon have risen again from the muck. I travel to Ilios, to strike at them from Kythira. But the Athenian assembly failed to provide me with forces. I need the strongest warriors. As such, I came to you."

Alexandra grimaced. "You will not find a sympathetic ear among those old men. The struggles for power in the wake of the death of Alexandros fill them with apprehension. One wrong move and Sparta might find itself bereft of much-needed soldiers."

The taller man gave a grave nod. "You speak sooth. This land is in turmoil. My city only recently overthrew the Macedonian yoke. But I must ask regardless."

"They meet tomorrow," Alexandra stated with a nod of acknowledgment. "They will remember your leadership in years past: I expect they will permit you to speak, at least for a while." She frowned. "Have you a place to sleep? To eat?"

The question was met with a shrug from Reinhartos. "Our coin is dwindling. We can make camp away from the city."

"You will have to, should you stay longer than one night," she replied briskly. "But tonight you may eat with my *lochagos*, and you may sleep within Spartan city limits. I owe you that much."

"You owe me nothing, Zaryanéos," Reinhartos replied with a small smile. "But I will accept your generosity."

"*Kallias!*" Alexandra called out, and from the ranks there came a soldier, tall, hazel-eyed, wiry. "Show the honorable Uiliam to the visitors' housing. You know the place? To the north?" She received a respectful nod in reply.

"My second shall guide you to I shall show the rest of your men to where they can make camp. Bid them to follow me," the huge woman stated plainly, and with a hand gesture and a shouted order she and her men set off south, towards the city.

Angela grabbed at Reinhartos's *himaton* as soon as the strange woman was out of earshot. "Who on earth was *that*?" she exclaimed. "She is built like a Titan. You know her?"

"Indeed I do," said Reinhartos proudly. "Alexandra Zaryanéos, Sparta's strongest daughter. She fought her whole city to follow the soldier's path. I came to know her in her sixteenth summer. She had fled Sparta, unwilling to accept their refusal to let her fight alongside men. I taught her much of what she knows—how to handle her sword, how to use it as a shield, how to train her strength daily. I am told that upon her return, she challenged the *gerousia* to send their best men to fight her; had she lost, she would have accepted exile. But she bested threescore men in single combat before they accepted her as one of their own. She is my greatest pupil of all."

They made their way, led by Zaryanéos's second-in-command to a simple villa, well-maintained despite obviously being seldom occupied. Kallias, the second-in-command, made his introductions and explained that this house was generally reserved for diplomats.

"You must truly have the respect of my commander," he said, plainly sizing up the visitors. Distrust stirred within Angela as his eyes passed over Fareeha's form, but she attempted to brush it aside. "Make what preparations you must. I shall wait outside for you so as to lead you to the barracks—tonight you will dine with us."

The dinner that this Zaryanéos's *lochagos* put on was, to Angela's surprise, delicious. A simple rabbit stew, enriched in flavor and texture by the presence of turnips and peas; a host of roast pheasant, served without sauce yet well-seasoned, delivered to the table by silent *helotes*; pickled olives in small clay dishes, their flesh wrinkled and flavor subtle; a final course of cheese, both soft and hard, ostensibly from a farm not more than two *stadia* away. Angela had always been told that the Spartan cuisine was their major failing: your average Athenian would, when plied with sufficient *tsukoidia*, aver that whatever the Spartans might have had in military might, they lacked in even the most base of culinary arts. Angela now realized that Spartan cuisine was in no way worse than that of Athens, but simply lacked the spices and sauces that traditionally adorned Athenian food. *Typical Athenian snobbery*, she thought, fishing the last chunks of rabbit from her bowl; *Anyone less cultured than us is a barbarian, and anyone more cultured is decadent.*

Yet as the meal stretched on, Angela had no more time to reflect. Agony was visited upon her: she watched, with slowly dawning horror, as Kallias seated himself across from Fareeha and flirted dreadfully and shamelessly with the Egyptian. He repeatedly asked her questions (and treated each answer with the sort of reverence usually accorded to the dying words of a prophet), took it upon himself to refill her wine, leapt at the slightest opportunity to tell her a joke. Fareeha's skin was a soft mahogany in the candlelight; Angela took turns staring at her, then gritting her teeth at the sight of Kallias doing exactly the same thing. He was a handsome man, Angela admitted internally—his hazel eyes were sharp and intelligent, his skin a deep olive, free of pockmarks and blemishes, his form strong but subtle in its musculature, his teeth whole and healthy—but Angela's nails sunk deeper into her palms with every coquettish gesture he made towards the woman across from him. And Fareeha herself was, as always, unreadable: she laughed at the man's jokes, thanked him when he passed her a plate or a fresh cup of wine, and met his eyes on occasion.

But doubt gnawed at Angela: was that, as he made eye contact with her again, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth? The light was dimmer than Angela liked: could she be blushing at his sly compliments?

And then from his mouth came words in Egyptian—accented, halting, but Egyptian nonetheless—and Fareeha's jaw dropped, then her eyes sparkled, and a genuine, unforced smile came to her face.

A dark, awful, acidic jealousy stirred in her stomach, fanged and vicious, like something writhing at the bottom of a cold and dark lake. She drank the rest of her wine in a single gulp and locked her gaze on the plate before her, her cheeks burning and her teeth grit. An observant *helot* came and refilled her goblet; she drank that to the dregs too, and gestured impatiently at the servant for more.

How dare he. I don't care who he is—he could be Herakles brought back to life—how dare he look at her that way. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

When next she looked up, and Kallias was leaning towards Fareeha, arm across the table, his hand covering hers. A red mist of rage descended over her vision, and she began to rise to her feet, agonized yet somehow numb, ready to unleash wrathful obscenities on the handsome Spartan—

—when she felt a strong hand grasping her bicep, pulling her back down into her chair. She looked to her left, incredulously, at the hand's owner, to discover that it was Salōmē, her expression sterner than she had ever seen it before.

"Watch yourself, young doctor, before you do something you regret." Salōmē's voice was low yet cutting, devoid of anything approaching mirth or levity. "I think it best you retire for the night, lest you come to blows with one of our hosts."

"But—they—he—" Angela spluttered, the tempest within her rendering her unable to get a coherent word out.

"Go," Salōmē ordered. "Your bodyguard will not go astray. She shall not leave my sight. Should anyone ask, I will say you became unwell. But you must go, now."

Angela could see she would brook no argument. And beneath that steely glare she felt her anger dissipate, replaced with shame and nausea. She turned and began a long, solitary walk back to the villa, feeling not unlike a chastised child—and no more wise than one, either.

It was an ugly thing, this book that Angela had found beneath her bed in the villa: its vellum was hard and warped, erased at least twice before, and its binding was frayed, haphazard. It could fall apart any minute, Angela reckoned. *Like me*, she thought, giving a pained smile at her stab of self-pity.

She turned it over and blinked in surprise at the name on the cover. **Σάπφω**. *Sappho*. In the Aeolic Greek, not the local Doric. Oh, dear. Angela knew of Sappho. Everyone did: she was called the tenth Muse for a reason, after all. And everyone knew of... well, her inclinations. Athenians of centuries past denied it, of course, the fools, but Angela knew, oh yes, she knew: ever since she was a youth, skinny, gangly, wondering why the boys never caught her eye like the girls, and had overheard a traveling poet sing Sappho's work—a song of paralyzing love for a woman—the young Angela had realized, wide-eyed with surprise, that here was someone who, long-dead though she was, thought, felt, keened, lusted, and ached in the way she did.

Books of poetry in Sparta, Angela thought, giving a wry and mirthless smile. *The world holds such wonders. Some traveler must have left it.* She flipped it open, leafed through a few pages, settling on a poem at random. As she read it, her eyes widened, and something deep inside her went cold.

Fareeha burst into the room before too long, eyes scanning around furiously, relief visibly crossing her face when she espied Angela's form.

"You... you left. Why?"

Angela winced. *You truly cannot see*, she remarked internally. Her gaze fell down, onto the book before her, and she began reading.

"He's equal with the gods, that man
who sits across from you,
face to face, close enough to sip
your voice's sweetness."

Angela's found her cheeks burning and voice quavering, but she continued, eyes fixed on the pages of the palimpsest. She did not dare look up to gauge Fareeha's reaction; she could hardly bear even the thought.

"And it excites my mind,
your laughter, glittering.
So, when I see you, for a moment,
my voice goes."

The silence hung in the air, thick, fetid, insuperable. Angela took a few shallow breaths, swallowing, hoping to smooth out the hitch that threatened to encroach on her voice. Yet she read on:

"My tongue freezes. Fire,
delicate fire, in the flesh.
Blind, stunned, the sound
of thunder, in my ears."

"Shivering with sweat, cold
tremors over the skin,
I turn the colour of dead grass,
and I'm an inch from dying."

More verses lay below, but Angela's vision swam with something strange and hot. She realized, after a few beats of confusion, that she was crying. And then a word from Fareeha, harsh, hard, loud—

"*Stop.*"

"Why should I?" spat Angela, her tears choking the words as they emerged. "After what you put me through tonight?"

"I did not enjoy it," Fareeha replied quickly and low-voiced. Though Angela was turned away, facing the corner, she caught a glimpse of Fareeha's face in her peripheral vision—it was grave, drawn, furrowed with sadness.

"Oh, spare me," Angela replied, her lip curled. "You did nothing to dodge his charms. You laughed"—here her sobs crept again into her voice—"he made you laugh." Angela's head spun and something in her stomach gnawed nauseatingly.

"Angela, you are being cruel," Fareeha said, and the use of her name sent a jolt through the blonde, and she no longer bothered attempting to hold back her tears. She felt stretched, pulled, trapped, as though drowning. Confessions and accusations and entreaties crashed through her

mind, but her tongue lay stiff, unused: she could only sob, looking at Fareeha, staring at her umber skin, her visage soft in the lamplight. She realized they were both trembling.

It was Fareeha who broke the silence. "When... when he looked at me, and spoke with me, and put his hand on mine"—

Fareeha's voice was slow, timorous, waving with the silvery edge of unshed tears—

"I had... I had to pretend that he... was you."

And with that, something snapped inside Angela, something that had until then held back her feelings, her last vestiges of self-control. She wiped her eyes with her forearm, mustered up every ounce of courage she had, and marched across the room, and took the Egyptian in her arms, and looked straight in her eyes, those deep, dark, amber eyes, and held her breath, and drew Fareeha close, and, heart fluttering like a hummingbird, kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

There are many translations of Sappho 31, and each is beautiful in its own way. I chose the one that felt the closest to Messenger's prose style—it was translated by A.S. Kline and used in accordance with the copyright terms on [his website](#). Thank you very much to him for his wonderful work.

Thank you all for being patient. This chapter didn't take as long as the previous, but it still was a drag. As always, I owe a debt of gratitude to problematikk, the best beta reader out there. I would also like to thank LogosMinusPity for being endlessly encouraging in the face of my near-constant complaints. As always, drop me a line on [Tumblr](#) with complaints, compliments, or death threats.

Confession

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I dream, again. This time it is interrupted, shifting, fragmented like shattered glass.

I am in a large room, with padding and weights on handles and strange machines around me. My sweat cools me, and the scent of others' sweat pervades my surroundings. Through the small windows dotting the walls there shines the first light of dawn.

I am on my back, resting on a padded surface, grasping a weighted bar in my hands. It weighs more than I do, yet I lower it to my sternum and raise it up again and again. I can feel the muscles of my chest begin to sing, then to burn, then to feel nothing, numbed by exertion. Beads of sweat roll off my forehead, dripping with a slight *pock* onto the bench that supports me. I fight to keep my breathing slow and regular: I know that steady respiration is the key to control, and that control, not lifting capability, is the goal of such exercise.

By the time I have finished, I can barely think. My whole body thrums with the effort as I push up the bar one more time, grunting with exertion, my heartbeat pounding bam-bam-bam in my ears. I let the bar fall onto its shelf above me with a clang that reverberates throughout the empty room. I take a moment to breathe and to appreciate the ataraxia that exercise brings me: my head is far noisier—thoughts of training, constant input from heightened senses, the shock of oft recalled battles—than I ever admit, even to my teammates. It can be chaotic, unsettling. Exercise brings silence.

My eyes are closed and my heartbeat's pounding is lessening when I hear a gentle cough from the vicinity of the door. I sit upright with a start—I do not like to be surprised—but I relax when I catch a glimpse of blonde tresses, a lab coat, a small smile.

It is me. Not this body through which I dream, but me, the dreamer, Angela. I sit up and match her smile.

"Up early, Pharah?" Her voice is quiet yet melodic and joyful.

I smile. "Sleep has been for me a luxury, Doctor. It still does not feel right to rest as long and as often as some of the team do." My voice is throaty, low, mahogany, not my own. "And you?"

My angel sighs and rubs her eyes. She is tired, I can tell. "Too many cups of coffee today. So much work. It has been but a month since the recall and I can already see the wear and tear on the team." She looks to the ceiling, remembering. "Morrison's knee is in bad shape; he needs arthroscopic surgery. I've scheduled it for Tuesday. He will complain mightily, the oaf. Winston caught a chestful of shrapnel from an exploding omnic. He's sedated. Bastion's firmware got slightly corrupted after that rocket he took in Addis Ababa, so he needs a reflash and a run through his test suite just to be safe."

A pause. "But not you."

I smile. "No, not me."

"Always in perfect shape. Always unscathed. You... are strong."

Strong. The word echoes in my ears.

And the dream twists around me, as dreams are so wont to do, and the scene changes. And now I am surrounded by people, laughing, happy—my friends, my compatriots, in a small kitchen late at night.

We are gathered around a man, a young man, dark-skinned, grinning widely. His hair is tied back in thick braids. bound by vivid green cloth. The blonde angel—me, yet not—peeks into the room, her eyes shining, then enters, holding a cake, a strangely shaped ring of dough dusted in white, dotted with candles.

At the sight of the cake, there is applause from all corners of the room, and a song begins:

Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday, dear Lúcio,
Happy birthday to you...

As the cake is placed in front of the young man, I see a dampness sparkle in his eyes. No doubt he will claim it is just the smoke from the candles. But I know better.

I feel an arm curl around my waist, and I give a small start, until I see who it belongs to—the angel, of course. I hear her give a small sigh, and I in turn slide an arm around her waist. I pull her close.

And then the dream twists once more, this time thrusting me into battle. Projectiles whiz around me and the smell of soot and cordite hang heavy. I am running; my training whispers to me as to where to go, when to duck, who to shoot. My team and I are fighting strange metal men, a host of them, fleeing and fighting simultaneously. Positioned around me are a man letting arrows fly from a massive bow, another with a large leather hat and a lettered belt buckle, a small woman, bundled in a coat, ice flying from her hefty weapon, and—so bizarre I can hardly comprehend it—an ape, roaring deafeningly, pounding our foes into a pulp. And behind all of us, flitting from injured to injured, my angel, clad in her suit, her face stern with the grimness of battle.

Our vessel lies in the distance. Hope stabs in my bosom. We redouble our efforts, propelling ourselves towards safety, our weapons ripping the enemies to metal shreds, yet their ranks always reforming—*there must be thousands of them*, I think, and scowl.

And then, overhead, many meters away, too far to hit with our weapons, a winged craft—small, nimble—flies, and red lights emerge from it, tracing a crimson grid across the fire-scarred ground, almost quicker than the eye can follow, and the lights land on her, my angel, and another red light glows on the craft overhead. A menacing *click* emanates from it. And then flame and smoke as it fires a projectile at her.

I see the fear on her face, illuminated by the fire billowing out of the weapon overhead, and I know I have but one choice. I jet my engines, all power to my jetpack, and fly forward, the acceleration so sudden that my joints scream, putting myself in between her and the vicious rocket spiraling towards her, and I hear her scream *no, Fareeha*, and the rocket hits me, and everything goes black.

Angela woke up suddenly, sitting up, heart pounding, breathing heavily, feeling the sweat on her skin.

That dream... did I die? Was I...

And then the hangover hit, and she slumped back down into the bed, cursing herself and all her

foolishness, all thoughts of dreams cast aside. And when the memories of last night came to her, her jealousy and her tears and the kiss she had shared with her tall bodyguard, her stomach went cold and her cheeks burned. She rolled over with a moan.

She remembered, despite the haze that the alcohol cast upon her memories, the sensations of the kiss—Fareeha's soft lips, the sensation of her hand on the Egyptian's cheek, the angle at which Fareeha held her head to kiss the shorter woman properly—and then, fuzzier now, the aftermath, a stammered apology, Fareeha's dumbfounded expression, a silence in the room only broken by Angela's slow retreat back to her bed.

With another moan, Angela dragged herself out of bed, fighting the wave of nausea that rolled over and through her. She donned her himation, just in time for Reinhartos's jolly face to poke into the villa and request her presence. Fareeha, she noted with a stab of dread, was nowhere to be seen.

Despite Angela's status as Reinhartos's second-in-command, the guards in front of the ephors' chamber flatly refused, on account of Angela's sex, to let her accompany Reinhartos before them. No amount of Reinhartos's glad-handing or elegantly-phrased requests on Angela's part proved effective, and before too long Reinhartos grew impatient and, with a mouthed apology, disappeared through the great oaken doors, leaving a sullen Angela (and a watchful Fareeha, who had emerged as if from nowhere on their walk to the ephors, pointedly not making eye contact with the doctor) alone outside.

She turned on her heel and stalked down the footpath that led to the ephors' chamber. Her mood, already angry from the guards' foolishness, was worsened by the headache she bore from the previous night's libations. Fareeha, noticing the blonde's approach, fell into step beside her, silent as always. Angela stole a glance at her bodyguard, noting and appreciating the rivulets of sweat that wandered down her neck. She wanted to kiss her again, more, forever, with the fire and hunger that—yes, she acknowledged now, she burned for Fareeha, burned more profoundly than anyone else could see, her inability to hide her feelings aside. But something inside Angela quailed at bringing it up. So they walked along the footpath, towards the Spartan market.

She broke the silence after what seemed like ten eternities.

"What do you think of Sparta, Fareeha?"

"It is... good. I prefer it here to Athens." Her speech was calm and unconcerned, but inside Angela felt a jolt of surprise, one that soon twisted and turned to resentment.

"And why is that?"

"It is more... orderly here. I can see it. There is power here, exercised well. Not like your dimokratia. It is... sloppy. Dangerous."

Angela's eyebrows rose sharply. "I am surprised, Fareeha. You seem like the sort of person who would cleave to personal freedoms. Why support a monarchy, especially one of two kings like Sparta?"

"Justice must not lie in the hands of the people," replied Fareeha confidently. "It is too... how do you say it? Important? Important. Yes."

"But kings are people, too," Angela replied, a note of frustration bleeding into the edge of her voice. "History is littered with the carnage and injustices wrought by foolish, inbred royalty."

"You are right. Kings must earn trust. But your dimokratia... any man can be a king. Even stupid and evil men. All they must do is lie to the people." A bird flew overhead, and Fareeha shaded her eyes so as to track the vector it traced through the air, turning around as she followed it, facing the chamber of the ephors. "And then they think their actions are just."

A good point, Angela admitted internally. She recalled many incompetent Athenian politicians, some addled by syphilis, some enfeebled by dotage, and some sabotaged simply by their own ego. Other politicians had rallied together to try to corral or shrink the offenders' spheres of influence, but there was only so much they could do against a legally elected official.

"But a dimokratia can remove the criminal and the incompetent," Angela pointed out. "A monarchy allows a tyrant to persist as long as he still draws breath, and as long as he has an army to subjugate those that would see him draw breath no longer."

Fareeha shrugged, watching the bird circle its way over the two women's heads. "It is true. But kings die, and people endure. Meanwhile, even the best dimokratia cannot match the might or the unity of a country under a good king."

"Freedom is more important than than unity, Fareeha," Angela would have replied. But she was distracted, for at that moment the women spotted the unmistakable silhouette of Reinhartos making his way toward them.

As Angela caught a glimpse of his face, her heart sank. His expression was drawn, grave, entirely bereft of his normal cheer.

"You return... soon," Angela ventured.

"The ephors gave me nothing," he intoned. "Old, foolish men. Cowards."

Angela could not think of anything to say. She hoped that the morose expression on her face conveyed sufficient sympathy.

"Again I am denied troops, supplies, weapons," rumbled the giant. "When this was brought upon me in Athens, I viewed it as a challenge to overcome. But twice? I... have doubts now." He looked in the direction of the temple. "Perhaps the gods do not wish me to have my vengeance. Perhaps I was a fool to drag you all this way." His gaze fell, his countenance aggrieved.

"Don't lose heart, old ox," Angela replied, keeping up the cheeriest facade she could, despite her equal disappointment at hearing Reinhartos's ill tidings. *A pox on those old men*. "This is hardly the first time you've hit in a bump in the road. How are our funds? We could hire mercenaries, a brace of men would run us—"

"We are nearly bereft of coin," Reinhartos replied unhappily. "We have perhaps enough to make it back to Athens, though we shall have to forage on the way. I wish not to give up—even the suggestion sticks in my craw. But we cannot strike at Talon with our forces—we number less than two dozen."

"There must be something we can do..." Angela trailed off, unable to think of any immediately solutions.

"I will think. But... I lose heart, child."

The three walked back to their lodgings, exchanging no further words, .

That evening, after the sun had fallen but before the city's inhabitants took their rest, the three

found themselves back in the villa. Reinhartos lay on his cot, back to the wall, not quite sleeping yet not quite awake either. It was an ability she had noticed in nearly all the soldiers in the caravan, this capability to doze on command. *It must be terribly useful in the military life*, Angela mused. *It seems an exhausting one*. She regarded him for a few more seconds: the trip had taken a clear toll on him, as evidenced by his lined and weather-reddened face, his dusty sandals, and the frayed ends of his himation. *What a strange man*, she thought. *Most like him are growing fat on candied figs in their Athenian villas. And here he is, perhaps the most eminent of them all, thirty leagues from his home, chasing down what most would consider a figment of the past, a shadow in the night. He is among the most driven men I have ever met, yet I can not comprehend that which drives him.*

"Angela! Reinhartos!", whispered Fareeha, urgency plain in her voice, waking the blonde from her reverie. Fareeha was peering out of the small window inset in the stucco wall; her hands were already on her sword and shield. Angela moved close, to Fareeha's side (and could not resist yet another moment's glance at the Egyptian, at the hardness of her expression and the fierceness of her eyes) and peered out the window.

Climbing slowly to his feet, Reinhartos opened the door, and his eyes went wide when he made out what lay shrouded in the gloom outside.

Men—Spartans, all of them, clad in red raiment and bearing bronze shields emblazoned with the Lacadaemonian lambda—stood, silent, arrayed in formation before the small house. Angela, sharing in Reinhartos's shock, dazedly attempted to count how many men lay ready; she reckoned twelvescore, if not more.

The mass of men stood silent. The only sound was the clank of shields and the rustle of cloaks as, from the midst of the sea of men, there emerged the unmistakable figure of Alexandra.

"Zarya... what is this? Are we being expelled?" Reinhartos's brow was furrowed and his countenance guarded.

Alexandra gave a laugh, a peculiarly high and melodious one. "Far from it, General. I spoke with the ephors. Well, perhaps 'spoke with' is too broad a term—let us say that I informed them of my decision," Alexandra stated matter-of-factly.

I thought the ephors permitted no woman to stand before them, thought Angela wryly. *But I am not as... intimidating as this Alexandra.*

"And what decision is this, Alexandra?" asked Reinhartos, his voice still wary.

"Sparta owes you a debt, Reinhartos. The old men may be too blind to see it, but I am not. For I was there when this gift was rendered, and let be said by no man that this Zaryanova forgets what others have done for her and her nation." She brought an enormous fist to her chest for emphasis. "I informed the ephors that I would ask two hundred men to travel with me, alongside you. Ask, not command—this is not an order, it is a request." She gestured behind her, at the men standing row on row. "And here they are. Brave men to the last. Four wagons of supplies. And the finest smith"—here she gestured to a small man, slightly hunched of back yet as muscular as any of the men that stood before them, with a mighty grey beard braided in twain—"in all our city."

Alexandra drew herself up to her full height. Though she was not much taller than Angela, and nigh one cubit shorter than Reinhartos, at this moment she seemed taller than anyone around her.

"My nation shall pay its debts, General. No matter what some doddering old men say. Two hundred men stand ready to fight for you, all of whom came when summoned."

"I..." Reinhartos seemed, perhaps for the first time in Angela's recollection, lost for words. "I am grateful to you, Zarya." *And each Spartan warrior is worth five ordinary men*, Angela thought, hope brimming warmly in her heart.

"Your destination is Ilios, is it not?" queried the Spartan, receiving a nod in reply. "Excellent. It is little more than a day's travel. If we leave in the morning, we should be there by sunup the next day."

"Zarya..." Reinhartos's smile was broad beyond imagining, his posture more regal than she had seen in weeks.

"You shall be my general once more, Reinhartos Uiliam," Alexandra proclaimed, her smile mirroring the Athenian's. "One last time. One more fight, to cast a light on the shadow that pursues you, to ensure a safe life for you to see to its end."

Angela swore in that instant never to tell anyone of the tear she noticed roll down Reinhartos's cheek.

The next day's travel was long and hot, yet blessedly uneventful. After so long traveling with twenty, Angela found it hard to adjust to traveling with two hundred: what had been a quiet caravan was now a cacophonous river of men that left dust clouds in their wake. The braying of oxen, the clanging clamor of pots and pans from the wagons, the metronomic clod-clod-clod of Spartan boots on dirt roads—it was nigh overwhelming for the doctor.

Nightfall brought no further measure of silence; the trees and brush flickered with the dancing light of campfires. Fareeha had built a campfire for herself and Angela on the edge of the campsite. Angela tried, for once, not to stare as the Egyptian knelt at the collection of logs and tinder and coaxed sparks from her flint and steel.

I am tired, she thought. *I am tired of pretending. To her, and to myself about her.*

And then, as it had in the Spartan villa, something inside her snapped—her inhibitions? her sense? her rationality? Whatever it was, it left her, blowing away like ashes on the wind, and she felt a tremendous lightness flow through her, a sudden dose of clarity, and a knowledge of what she must do, even if it were to destroy her in the doing.

"Fareeha," she whispered, and the Egyptian's head snapped around to face her. "I must speak with you. In... private. Will you follow me?" Confusion flashed for a moment across the other woman's face, but soon she nodded and rose to her feet.

Angela led Fareeha into the trees, away from the clearing, past bracken and fern and hedge. Had she looked behind, she would have seen a thoroughly bemused expression on Fareeha's face, one that deepened the further they made their way into the forest. When she adjudged she was sufficient distance from the camp, she turned, facing Fareeha, whose face was striped with trees' crooked shadows, cast by the moon that hung, effulgent, to the north. Angela rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, swallowing the anxiety-saliva that filled her mouth again and again. She felt her hands shake, filled with hope and fear as they were, and laced them together behind her back so Fareeha would not see.

"I've—I've been thinking. About how we kissed—well, about how I kissed you, more like. I haven't been able to get it out of my head." She dug her nails into her palms, hoping that the discomfort would steady her. "And... and I wanted to know if you'd like to do it again."

And she saw Fareeha's eyes go wide, and then all her words tumbled out of her, crashing and

flowing like water over rocks, her normal eloquence but a memory. "I mean, only if *you* want it, I'd never—I'd never order you to do it, I'd rather die—it's just that after that night in Sparta, you're all I can think about—yes, I was drunk then, but I'm sober now, and I want this." She took a deep breath, trying to slow the thudding of her heart and the dizziness that coursed its way through her head. "I want this," she repeated, mustering up every scrap of courage she had. "I want you."

Fareeha remained frozen, and Angela, for a moment wrapped in the icy chill of rejection, felt something in her insides twist and ache. She began to apologize, to beg forgiveness for her presumption, but then Fareeha stepped forward with warmth and wonder in her dark eyes, and the words died on Angela's lips. She closed the distance between her and Angela, her footsteps ever-soft, and brought a calloused hand to rest on Angela's cheek. Her eyes closed instinctively at the touch.

Then she felt Fareeha's lips on hers, and everything around and within her went very quiet. There was only the sensation of Fareeha's lips on hers, warm, weathered, yet delicate and soft. And then her mouth started moving against Angela's, and Angela felt her strength, and laced her arms around Fareeha's waist, her head inclined up to reach the taller woman's mouth. She felt Fareeha's hair brush against her cheeks and pulled herself closer, sharing in the other woman's heat, and smiled against her lips.

They would remain like that, lips together, under the moon, for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks, as always, to problematck for her indispensable help whipping my words into shape.

The political discussion that Angela and Fareeha have in this one may seem a little on-the-nose, given the state of the world right now, but I had always planned for them to have it, believe it or not.

As always, you can hit me up on [tumblr](#) if you want to reach me. Thank you all so much for reading.

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